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Running on Time

Domestic Work and Commuting in
West Bengal, India

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PhD in Sociology

The University of Edinburgh

2018

Declaration

I hereby confirm that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Lauren Wilks

Edinburgh, 5 December 2018

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Abstract

While there is a significant and burgeoning body of literature on (paid) domestic work in India, much of which explores the broader context of migration within which this labour often takes place, very little looks at domestic workers' commutes – daily or regular travel between home and work which is similarly linked to processes of neoliberalism and urban development. At the same time, much of the wider literature on commuting – which has been conducted mainly in Northern contexts – fails to properly consider the *experience* of commuting; furthermore, this literature often paints a rather rosy picture of commuting – as a complex mobility strategy or a space for thinking, relaxing, and socialising – which does not generally fit with the situation in India. This thesis, then, aims to fill this gap and offer a corrective to the wider literature on commuting by providing a rich and detailed account of the everyday lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers in Kolkata. In doing so, it contributes to wider sociological debates about work, precarity, and time/labour intensification.

Drawing on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata and rural West Bengal and utilising novel methodological approaches and tools (multi-sited and 'moving' ethnography), I explore the experience of commuting for domestic workers in Kolkata – in other words, *what it is like* to undertake these journeys, which are often long and arduous, and *what it is like* to combine them with a heavy burden of paid and unpaid domestic work. I also draw attention to the *embedded* and *cumulative* nature of commuting, illustrating how commuting affects other areas of workers' lives and making a case for commuting as a category of analysis. The commute, as we shall see, requires careful and constant negotiation: it involves time and money, and it takes a serious toll on workers' health and relationships, contributing to extreme time pressure and often causing problems for workers, with employers *and* with husbands and families.

Overall, the thesis highlights the intense insecurity commuters face, as well as the pragmatism with which they manage this insecurity in their day-to-day lives. At work and at home, commuters make everyday bargains and trade-offs, often swapping one form of precarity for another; the language of 'adjustment' and the question, *ki korbo?* (what will I do? What else can I do?), is, as we shall see, a constant refrain in their accounts. The thesis also shows, however, that while the experience of commuting is predominantly articulated by workers as one of pain and suffering (*koshto*), and all those who can give it up after a certain point do so, workers are, at the same time, forging networks and solidarities *through* commuting, which not only help them to endure the structural burdens of commuting and paid/unpaid domestic work but may, in future, also help them to bargain for better conditions of work.

Lay Summary

Commuting domestic workers are among the growing ranks of women ‘live-out’ or ‘visiting’ domestic workers in Kolkata, most of whom work part-time in one or more (usually several) households a day. Unlike city-dwelling domestic workers, however, who have been the focus of recent research, commuters – who live in villages and peri-urban areas outside the city and who travel often considerable distances to get to work – are yet to receive proper academic attention. This thesis, then, offers a rich and detailed account of a significant yet under-studied group: commuting domestic workers in Kolkata.

Commuting domestic workers are mostly women and live in rural villages and peri-urban areas *outside* Kolkata, travelling into the city daily by train and other forms of public transport. Their journeys are often long and arduous and they face various problems along the way: overcrowding, a lack of access to toilets, harassment. In the city, they often juggle several different jobs, specialising in various types of work (cooking, cleaning, care work) and in many cases rushing between these jobs – as well as to and from the city. There is stiff competition in the neighbourhoods where they work, and much mistrust among employers; in short, there is a high degree of turnover and commuters are easily dismissed and replaced.

The thesis also explores commuters’ wider, personal lives. It shows how women must balance their work in the city with a heavy burden of *unpaid* domestic work in their own homes; because of dominant ideas about women’s ‘honour’ and the stigma around women’s work and mobility, moreover they must continually perform respectability, regulating their speech and behaviour in case husbands and others begin to ‘doubt’. If commuters are late in reaching home – something which is often unavoidable due to transport delays and, again, the problem of overcrowding – they in many cases suffer violence and abuse from husbands, as well as from sons and neighbours.

In addition, the thesis discusses commuters’ children, offering a more optimistic story about commuters’ hopes for the future and the promise of a better life for their children. Commuters often invest tremendous amounts of time, money, and energy in children’s education, hopeful that this investment will pay off and their children will secure ‘good jobs’; however, even those who cannot easily afford to pay for children’s schooling and tuition value *some* amount of education for their children, even if they end up deciding to marry their children early.

Overall, then, the thesis highlights both the intense insecurity of commuters’ lives and the ways in which commuters manage this insecurity day-to-day. At home and at

work, commuters make everyday bargains and trade-offs, staying in jobs they are unhappy with but which offer a form of stability and flexibility or else settling for *some* rather than *more* education for their children. The thesis also shows that, while the experience of commuting is predominantly explained by workers in terms of pain and suffering (*koshto*), commuters experience new freedoms through commuting; and, importantly, they are forming networks and solidarities with other workers and with NGOs, which not only help them to bear the hardships of their lives, but may, in future, also help them to bargain for better conditions of work.

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List of Abbreviations

AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
CITU	the Centre for Indian Trade Unions
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
ILO	International Labour Organization
INTUC	the Indian National Trade Union Congress
NDWM	the National Domestic Workers' Movement
PGPS	Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samiti
RSBY	Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana
SAWF	South Asia Women's Fund
SC	Scheduled Castes
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association

Glossary

<i>ayah</i>	carer/nursemaid/one who does 'patient care'
<i>babu</i>	educated, middle-class man
<i>barite kaaj/barir kaaj</i>	housework/domestic work
<i>basti</i>	informal settlement/slum
<i>bhadralok</i>	respectable middle and upper classes/man
<i>bhadramahila</i>	respectable middle- and upper-class woman
<i>bhodrosto</i>	respectable
<i>bodmash</i>	bad/wicked
<i>boudi</i>	'sister-in-law', 'woman of the house'/'mistress', a woman employer
<i>chakri</i>	service or salaried job
<i>choti</i>	slippers
<i>chuti</i>	holiday
<i>dada</i>	'older brother', a term of respect for older men
<i>Dalit</i>	literally 'broken'; signifies members of scheduled (lower) castes who suffer social exclusion, discrimination, and oppression
<i>didi</i>	'older sister', a term of respect for older women
<i>Durga Puja (Puja, Pujo)</i>	the most significant religious festival for Bengali Hindus
<i>gari</i>	car or small vehicle
<i>ghrina/ghenna</i>	disgust/contempt
<i>gram panchayat</i>	village council
<i>izzat</i>	honour
<i>jamadar</i>	domestic worker who primarily cleans bathrooms
<i>kaaj</i>	work/labour
<i>kaajer lok</i>	people who work/working people
<i>khawa-pora kaaj</i>	literally 'work that provides food and clothing', live-in domestic work
<i>ki korbo?</i>	what will I do? what can I do?
<i>ki bolbo?</i>	what will I say? what can I say?
<i>koshto</i>	to suffer/suffering
<i>malik</i>	'master'/'mistress', owner
<i>mashi-ma</i>	combines ' <i>mashi</i> ' (meaning 'mother's sister') and ' <i>ma</i> ' (meaning 'mother'), a term of endearment and respect for older women

<i>mishti</i>	sweets
<i>mishti kota</i>	sweet talk
<i>peth'er jonno</i>	literally 'for the stomach'; signifies hunger/poverty
<i>pucca</i>	literally 'cooked', 'solid'; signifies houses that are made of brick or other durable material
<i>rannar kaaj</i>	cooking work
<i>rickshaw-wallah</i>	one who pulls a cycle-rickshaw
<i>shakha-pola</i>	bangles worn by married Hindu women
<i>shinghara</i>	savoury snack
<i>sindoor</i>	vermillion worn on the hair parting by Bengali Hindu women to signify marriage
<i>thike kaaj</i>	cleaning and/or part-time/temporary work
<i>tiffin</i>	a snack or light meal carried to work or school
<i>thike meye</i>	a woman who does <i>thike kaaj</i> (housework/domestic work)

Chapter One: Introduction

Standing on the overhead footbridge at Ballygunge Junction¹ in the early morning, you will see hundreds, if not thousands of commuters – men and women – piling out of trains and rushing to get to work. Many take the stairs, but the more adventurous make their way across the tracks and over the pile of bricks and rubble at the side of the station. Train announcements blare from nearby speakers, mixing together with the other sounds that fill the air: screeching train breaks and train horns and, further away, rickshaw and bicycle bells, car horns, motorbike exhausts. Many commuters are dressed quite formally, ready for work in retail, information technology (IT), education; some are young and carry backpacks, students perhaps. Many, though, are informal sector workers – domestic workers, vendors, hawkers, some of the latter carrying huge bundles on their heads. The domestic workers are dressed similarly – light, synthetic sari, cloth bag, umbrella to shield from rain or sun, a pair of simple, rubber *choti* (slippers), easily removed and put back on, convenient for work. They hurry in pairs and small groups, or else by themselves, rushing past tea shops and *mishti* (sweet) shops and towards the busy thoroughfare of Gariahat from where they fan out into quieter, residential neighbourhoods – Manoharpukur, Lake Gardens, Hindustan Park. They stop outside the buildings where they work, reaching into bags for keys or pressing doorbells and waiting for keys to be dangled down on pieces of string as their *boudis*² peer down at them from balconies and windows above. The building doors open and one by one the women step inside, removing their *choti* and closing the doors behind them.³

This thesis is about the everyday lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers, a group which constitutes a significant segment of Kolkata's vast informal economy and a significant proportion of the growing ranks of 'live-out' domestic

¹ Ballygunge Junction is one of the busiest railway stations in south Kolkata.

² '*Boudi*' means 'sister-in-law' but is also commonly used to politely address and refer to women; in the context of domestic work, it refers to a woman employer or 'mistress'.

³ This vignette is a composite account based on general memories and reflections of the field; elsewhere, I draw directly on field notes and interviews excerpts, as well as on general memories and reflections.

workers in the city.⁴ I had not planned to carry out research on this topic, but rather travelled to Kolkata in late August 2014 with the intention of studying Bengali and conducting research on women's work in the informal sector more broadly;⁵ the decision to focus on domestic workers – and commuting domestic workers specifically – came about organically, after having spent a few months living in the city, and after having asked friends and acquaintances about these workers who, I noticed, were everywhere, servicing every home I visited, including the one where I lived.⁶ My Bengali teachers were the first to mention the link with commuting, urging me to go to Ballygunge Junction and see for myself the scale of this phenomenon; and, for more than a year afterwards, as the research unfolded, I spent many a morning and afternoon on the footbridge at Ballygunge Junction or on the platform at other local stations, observing and talking to domestic workers – mostly women – who travel to the city daily by train.

As in other Indian cities, domestic service is a part of the fabric of daily life in Kolkata and so after having moved to the city in August 2014 it did not take long for me to become familiar with both the discomfort and convenience of having someone to cook for and clean up after me.⁷ In the first place I stayed, a large, traditional Bengali house

⁴ Following the International Labour Organization (ILO), I use the term 'domestic work' to mean work performed in or for a private household or households in an employment relationship involving pay; a 'domestic worker' is one who engages in paid domestic work as defined above (ILO, 2018). I use the term 'commuting' to refer to daily or regular travel between one's place of home and work; and, in the context of my research, a commuting domestic worker is one who travels daily to the city by train (and other public transport) for domestic work. Although I include both women and men in my study, most commuting domestic workers are women, and so when I use the term 'commuter' I am referring to women commuters unless otherwise specified.

⁵ I had initially planned to conduct research on sex workers' rights in India and had chosen Kolkata as a field site because of the work of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (Unstoppable Women's Collaborative Committee), a large and influential sex workers' organisation based in Kolkata (see Gooptu & Bandyopadhyay, 2007). Shortly before travelling to Kolkata, however, I decided to broaden the focus to women's work in the informal sector, and, once in the city, I narrowed the focus again – to domestic work.

⁶ Despite this, Kolkata is an ideal site to explore the dynamics of domestic work and commuting. Kolkata is a former colonial capital where various kinds of domestic work can be found, and where vast numbers of informal sector workers – including domestic workers – commute daily from surrounding villages and peri-urban areas; it is also located in the state of West Bengal, which is home to the largest population of domestic workers of any state in the country (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 6).

⁷ Several of my 'Western' friends, who, like me, had initially been reluctant to take on the role of an employer, became used to and dependent on domestic workers; several in fact sought out 'maids' and 'cooks' of their own when moving into rented apartments – something which they would likely never have done in their own countries. Shalini Grover (2017: 123), writing

in a middle-class south Kolkata neighbourhood, I had my first up-close encounter with domestic service, becoming privy to, and indeed part of, the daily negotiations and contestations involved in sharing space with domestic workers. Like many other middle-class families in the neighbourhood, my host family employed two women, one for *thike kaaj* (cleaning) and another for *rannar kaaj* (cooking). The woman who did the cooking often arrived after I had left for my language school; but the *thike kaaj* worker, Dipali⁸ – a commuter in her early forties – would often be there when I came down to breakfast, standing beside the fridge hurriedly eating leftovers or else down on her hands and knees washing the floors.

My host mother explained to me soon after I had moved into the house that Dipali would come to clean my room a few times each week, though she could not tell me on which days (later I learned that Dipali was frequently absent or late). Dipali was also to clean my dirty clothes, which I was instructed to leave in a plastic bucket outside my bedroom door. I explained to my host mother that I was happy to clean my room and wash my clothes myself (the latter, I assumed, I could do using the washing machine in the kitchen); but I nevertheless agreed to the arrangement, careful of not wanting to upset my host mother, who, it seemed, considered it her responsibility to arrange this service. I had also assumed that Dipali would use the washing machine to clean my clothes; however, a week or so into my stay, I awoke to the sound of splashing water outside my bedroom (on the roof), peering out of the window to find Dipali lathering and rinsing out clothes, including my own, near the tap in the corner. The washing machine went unused for the four months I stayed in this house. It remained switched off and covered with a piece of fabric even during what my host brother, Arup (early thirties), called the ‘maid’s holiday’ – when Dipali took two days’ leave from work, disrupting the domestic routine and causing a state of agitation in the house. Arup seemed particularly distressed by Dipali’s absence, remarking the first morning of the ‘holiday’ (*chuti*) with a tone of exasperation that she

about expatriate (‘Western’) employers in New Delhi, explains that domestic ‘help’ is both highly affordable and allows for privileged lifestyles (for similar discussions in the context of Singapore and China, see Lundström, 2012 and Arieli, 2007 respectively).

⁸ Dipali is a pseudonym, as are all other names apart from those of research assistants. A discussion of participant anonymity and confidentiality is included in Chapter 3.

had left clothes soaking in buckets of soapy water: 'Who will do this work? My mother?'

Domestic Work in Kolkata

While it is, of course, possible that the washing machine had not been working properly, or my host family had simply chosen not to use it because of the high cost of running it – my second host family mentioned on several occasions the steep price of electricity in Kolkata – it is likely that the decision *not* to use the machine, and to continue asking Dipali to wash clothes by hand, was also connected to concerns about class status and the notion of a properly-run, 'respectable' middle-class home (Ray & Qayum, 2010). Domestic work in India has a long and unbroken history (Banerjee, 2004: 34) – and one too that has been shaped by the forces of colonialism and caste – however, it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that there developed a widespread belief that servants make better homes. This was a time when Indian nationalists, striving to mobilise mass support against the colonial state, developed a new conception of the family as a site of national regeneration and pride, in which women were accorded a pivotal role – as dutiful housewives and self-sacrificing mothers (Banerjee, 2004: 206; see also Kishwar, 1985; Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar, 2001).⁹ The new emphasis on women's 'honour' and 'respectability' signalled middle-class women's (partial) retreat into the private sphere and led to an increasing demand for domestic servants in the years following 1880 (Banerjee, 2004: 12, 123).¹⁰ The emerging lifestyle of the Bengali/Indian middle class was, as Swapna M. Banerjee (2004: 123) explains, predicated on a new division of labour in middle-class homes:

⁹ This ideology was so influential, as Devaki Jain (1985) observes, that even at the relatively lower levels of Bengali society, poverty did not push women to seek work outside the home to the extent that it did in other parts of India (see also Banerjee, 2004: 90).

¹⁰ According to the 1911 Census, domestic service accounted for 12% of all occupations in Calcutta, while Bombay, Madras, and Delhi showed 7.3%, 6.68%, and 6.1% respectively (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2008: 96). Furthermore, in British Bengal absolute numbers of domestic servants rose from 4,50,113 in 1921 to 8,03,996 in 1931 (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2008: 96). Census data can, of course, only give an indication of the number of people engaged in domestic service in India: due to varying interpretations of 'domestic work' and the subsequent problem of undercounting, as well as the tendency to overlook the presence of child workers, census data are arguably vastly conservative.

While the wife and the mother were entrusted with the responsibility of meeting the emotional demands of the husband and children and the efficient management of the home, there was a continued effort to shift manual work, specifically the dirtier, heavier tasks to domestic servants.

Thus, just as Indian ideologies attempted to distinguish themselves from 'the West' by creating and promoting a distinct and culturally-superior national identity (Chatterjee, 1989), the new language of respectability and domesticity underscored differences in caste, class, and social status between the newly-conceived middle-class woman, the 'mistress', and her immediate inferior, the 'maid' (Banerjee, 2004: 123; see also Borthwick, 1984). In Bengal, these efforts tied up closely with the emergence of a distinct and genteel Bengali middle-class – the *bhadralok* and the analogous *bhadramahila* – which similarly contributed to an emphasis on women's 'respectability' and 'honour' and an increasing demand for servants post-1880 (Banerjee, 2004: 88-92; see also Chakrabarty, 1989: 214-215).

With economic liberalisation, initiated in India in the 1990s, many new employers in the form of dual-income families (often young, working couples) have entered the market and these employers have come to depend on domestic workers in a way that is different to other employers – indeed in a way that is more practical and the result of *actual* rather than perceived or felt need (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 273). A large proportion of employers, however, continue to hire domestic workers for reasons of class, and because they are accustomed, morally and culturally, to receiving these services (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 123). Indeed, although increasing numbers of middle-class women are going out to work, often in India's burgeoning IT sector (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007) or in administrative services, management, retail, and education (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005; Gooptu, 2009), middle-class women's labour force participation continues to be relatively low – arguably because of the ideas to do with women's 'honour' outlined above. Unlike in other countries, then, there is thus no necessary relationship between the employment of domestic workers and middle-class women's labour-force participation in India; rather, the middle-class Indian 'mistress' or Bengali *boudi* is often home during the day to supervise the domestic workers in her employ (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 9). The hiring of domestic workers is also not, in this context, restricted to the most affluent classes: almost everyone who can afford to employ domestic workers does so (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 9, 13). Wealthy

upper-class and upper-middle-class families often employ several different kinds of domestic worker – drivers, gardeners, *ayahs*, cooks, and ‘maids’ – but many lower-middle-class and upper-working-class families also employ domestic workers, in most cases a part-timer for the more menial and ‘dirty’ work of washing dishes and floors (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 153). Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to find households (with the exception of poor, working class households) where the work of cleaning bathrooms is not outsourced to low-caste sweepers, called *jamadars* (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 99; Ray & Qayum, 2010: 76).

Because employers rely heavily on the reproductive services of domestic workers, even a day’s interruption to such services can cause major upheaval in the household, ‘which is not geared to manage the daily business of eating, drinking and cleaning up without help’ (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 123). Indeed, as Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta (2016: 121) note, in many Bengali households, food is prepared fresh for both main meals of the day (lunch and dinner); and, in many cases, food cooked in the morning will not be consumed in the evening – certainly not the next day. At main meals, moreover, it is common to have at least three or four dishes with rice or bread; and used dishes are in most cases washed daily, for fear of attracting ants and other pests. When domestic workers take leave, then, employers often struggle to adjust to life without them, indeed becoming frustrated, as Arup did, by the disruption a ‘maid’s holiday’ poses to the daily rhythm of the household. Furthermore, as indicated already, the spread of household technology like washing machines, refrigerators, and microwave ovens does not seem to have altered these practices to any marked degree; rather, ‘the availability of cheap domestic labour has helped to maintain, in some cases further elaborate, these rules and standards of housekeeping’ (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 121). As a result, during a ‘maid’s holiday’, employers bemoan the unswept floors and dirty clothes and dishes, while the ‘maid’ faces a double load of work on her return – dirty dishes stacked beside the sink or, as in Dipali’s case, soapy clothes soaking in buckets.

From ‘Family Retainer’ to ‘Part-timer’

One of the major recent changes in the landscape of paid domestic work in India has been the shift from men to women workers, which, in recent years, has been

accompanied and driven by a shift from live-in to live-out work. Indeed, domestic work was not always 'women's work' in India, or at least not in the same way that it is today. For much of the country's history, this work was carried out predominantly by men, often the trusted 'family retainer' who came from land and villages associated with the employing family's estates and worked for the family for several generations (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 7, 58; see also Banerjee, 2004). The shift from primarily men to primarily women workers took place considerably later than it did in Western Europe and North America (McBride, 1976; Katzman, 1978): women started entering domestic service in significant numbers in the 1920s and 1930s, following the destruction of traditional caste-based occupations and women's exclusion from agricultural and industrial employment, but it was only in the early 1990s that women workers started to clearly outnumber men workers in national census data (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 58-59; see also Banerjee, 1985). More recently, as Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum (2010: 43-46, 59) note, feminisation – and the accompanying shift to live-out work – has been fuelled by changes in urban living arrangements – specifically, the move from large, traditional, family houses to smaller, modern apartments in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Describing this move in the context of Kolkata's 'new globalized cityscape' (2010: 24), Ray and Qayum outline how apartment-living has brought spatial and security concerns for employers, as well as a widespread preference for women workers, despite the persisting belief that men make better servants; in the more confined space of the apartment, women are generally considered less threatening than (unknown) men, 'especially when there are daughters in the house and no adult family members to ensure their safety' (2010: 43-46, 59; see also Ray, 2000: 699).

Today, then, employers in Kolkata are more likely to employ one or several live-out women workers, who work part-time, rather than men (or women) live-in workers or 'family retainers', who work full-time and live with their employers. These live-out workers, who are variously described as 'freelancers' (Ray & Qayum, 2010), 'visiting' workers (Frøystad, 2003), and 'part-timers' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016) in the literature, are the most autonomous of the various kinds of domestic worker in Kolkata/India. They typically specialise in certain kinds of work (cooking, cleaning etc.) and juggle several different jobs and employers at once. They live in their own homes, both in the city and outside of it, and they have increasingly transactional and impersonal

relationships with employers, working for these employers daily but for limited and usually short periods each day.¹¹ They are, in other words, more ‘wage labourers’ than ‘servants’, bargaining with their employers over pay, leave, and non-wage benefits, and describing their work in most cases in terms of *kaaj* (work/labour) – *thike kaaj*, *rannar kaaj* – rather than *chakuril/chakri* (service) (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 4).¹²

Commuting Domestic Workers

Although, in Kolkata, live-out domestic workers reside both in the city and outside of it – that is, in urban informal settlements (*bastis*) and in commuter villages and peri-urban areas – this thesis is concerned with the experiences of the latter, with commuters, who travel to and from the city by suburban rail and other forms of public transport. Commuting is very much characteristic of Kolkata, and commuting domestic workers constitute a significant part of the broader category of ‘domestic worker’ in the city; yet, unlike city-dwelling domestic workers, whose experiences are discussed in detail by Sen and Sengupta (2016), they are yet to receive proper academic attention. Indeed, while the literature often addresses the links between domestic work and migration, both globally/transnationally (Constable, 1997; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a; Parreñas, 2001) and in the specific case of internal migration within India (Roy, 2003; Wadhawan, 2013; Banerjee, 2018), very little deals with women’s commutes – daily or regular travel which is similarly connected to processes of neoliberalism and urban development. There is, more broadly, a distinct lack of ethnographic research on commuting; and the research that *does* exist on this topic, which has been conducted mostly by urban geographers and in Northern contexts, often depicts commuting as a complex mobility strategy or a space for thinking, relaxing, and socialising (Lyons & Urry, 2005; Jain & Lyons, 2008; Gately, 2014: 223-228, 237-260). This rather rosy picture does not generally fit with the

¹¹ Care workers (*ayahs*) typically work in longer shifts for single employers, often also working through agencies. A discussion of the different kinds of work and working arrangement is included in Chapter 4.

¹² Even though the Bengali terms *chakor* (servant) and *jhi* (maid) have been largely replaced by terms such as *kaajer lok* (‘person who works’), *kaajer meye* (‘girl who works’) and *thike meye* (‘cleaning girl’/‘maid’), the English words ‘servant’ and ‘maidservant’ have not been replaced by some equivalent of ‘paid domestic worker’ (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 4). Furthermore, the feudal term, *malik*, meaning ‘master’/‘mistress’ or ‘owner’, is still sometimes used by workers to describe employers – even though kinship terms such as *boudi* (sister-in-law) or *dada* (elder brother) are now more commonly used.

situation in India (Roy, 2003; Kusters, 2009; Hirsch *et al.*, 2016), nor indeed with the situation in many other parts of the world (Ozyegin, 2001; Goldstein, 2003; Graglia, 2016; Erman & Kara, 2018).

In Kolkata and Mumbai, vast numbers of people travel daily on an overloaded and unreliable suburban rail system where risks to passengers' safety and security are high and where the term 'super dense crush loading' is used to describe the conditions commuters endure (Roy, 2003; Kusters, 2009; Gately, 2014: 184-191; Hirsch *et al.*, 2016).¹³ Some of these passengers commute for the same reasons as those mentioned in the Northern studies above – to advance their careers or to secure better and cheaper housing – but many others do so out of sheer necessity, that is, to earn a living and survive. A significant proportion of India's 'floating population' is in fact employed in the informal economy and many rural-urban commuters also have no fixed place of work (Sharma, 2017: 583; on India's informal sector see: Breman, 1996). In Kolkata and West Bengal, as Ananya Roy (2003: 95-97) notes, many rural-urban commuters are involved in the petty trading of perishables, while, for women commuters, who, in this particular context outnumber men commuters,¹⁴ domestic service is a key occupation. Poor women constitute a large proportion of rural-urban commuters (Roy, 2003: 97), and Kolkata's early morning suburban trains, which carry domestic workers from their own homes to those of their employers, are colloquially referred to by city-dwellers as the 'housemaid express' (Ghatak, 2014: 254; see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93).

This thesis, then, aims to fill an important gap with respect to literature on domestic work in India; and to offer a corrective to the wider literature on commuting by providing a rich and detailed account of commuting and domestic work in Kolkata and West Bengal. Building upon existing scholarship, and utilising novel methodological approaches and tools (multi-sited and 'moving' ethnography), it explores the *experience* of commuting for domestic workers in Kolkata – or, in other words, *what*

¹³ Using National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data which includes rural-urban and urban-to-rural commuters, as well as those with no fixed place of work, Ajay Sharma and S. Chandrasekhar (2014: 154) estimate that 24.62 million people commute between rural and urban areas in India (see also Sharma, 2017). Kolkata has the second largest suburban rail network after Mumbai: Sealdah Railway Station alone sees 1,800,000 passengers pass through daily and Howrah carries another 600,000 passengers (Roy, 2016).

¹⁴ This trend is reversed when looking at national-level data: across India, men commuters outnumber women commuters (Sharma, 2017: 584).

it is like to undertake these journeys, which are often long and arduous, and *what it is like* to combine them with a heavy burden of paid and unpaid domestic work. In doing so, it also draws attention to the *embedded* and *cumulative* nature of commuting, illustrating how commuting affects other areas of workers' lives and making a case for commuting as a category of analysis. Indeed, as we will see, the commute requires careful and constant negotiation: it involves time and money, and takes a serious toll on workers' health and relationships, the issue of 'being late' causing problems for workers not only with employers but also with husbands and families. Moreover, while commuters are the most autonomous of all the various categories and sub-categories of domestic worker in Kolkata, they are at the same time the most insecure, facing intense competition for jobs in the neighbourhoods where they work. Juggling several different jobs, a heavy burden of unpaid work, and often long and difficult commutes, they are also highly pressed for time – something which is now a major theme in the wider, sociological literature on work and labour (Hochschild, 2001; Southerton, 2003; Wajcman, 2008; Rosa, 2013).

Research Questions & Aims

Given the lack of in-depth, ethnographic research on commuting and domestic work in India, the central aim of this research is to develop a (better) understanding of the everyday lives and experiences of those engaged in commuting for domestic work. Following Sen and Sengupta (2016), I aim to shift the emphasis away from an exclusive focus on domestic workers' work and employers to one that looks at workers' broader lives and relationships in the context of commuting. In other words, I am interested in the experience of commuting and the extent to which the commute affects other aspects of commuters' lives. The question at the heart of this thesis is:

How do commuting domestic workers experience the commute – both day-to-day and over time – and how does the commute shape their understanding of work and family?

Within this overall question, however, are other questions that are focused on how commuting relates to women's broader lives: *How and why do domestic workers start commuting for domestic work? What is the commute like? What are commuters' relationships with employers like, and how does the commute affect their relationships*

with employers? How do commuters manage their unpaid work at home? What do commuters' husbands and families think about their work, and how do commuters manage their work in the city given ideas about women's 'honour'? Finally, how do commuters manage childcare responsibilities, and what do they want for their children?

Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises nine chapters, four of which (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8) can be considered 'data' or 'analysis' chapters. These data chapters are arranged to represent a typical day in a commuter's life – starting with the journey to work, workers' experiences at work, and finishing with their work at home and a discussion about children and workers' hopes for the future. Before getting to these data chapters, however, it is necessary to locate paid domestic work in India within a broader historical and geographical discussion. Chapter 2 thus provides an overview of some of the key literature on paid domestic work – both globally and in the specific case of India – tracing the main theoretical developments and discussions in the field. Chapter 3 focuses on methodology, describing the process by which I conducted the research and providing an overview of the research strategy, sample, methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 offers a discussion of commuters' profiles and backgrounds, focusing on their location outside the city and their reasons for taking up commuting for domestic work. It illustrates that commuting is sometimes a 'choice' for commuters and their families – albeit one made within a very limited set of circumstances – linked to the desire to own land and property; and it also shows the various choices women make *within* work – what type of work they do and so on – and how commuters' preferences and priorities shift over time and according to circumstance.

Chapter 5 then moves to the topic of the commute itself. It is structured in two parts, the first part discussing the challenges of commuting and the second part discussing the possibilities and opportunities of commuting – in terms of worker mobilisation. Chapter 6 focuses on commuters' relationships with employers and the various kinds of working arrangements and relationships that commuters have with employers. It highlights the importance of non-wage benefits for commuters (and other live-out

workers), as well as the extreme insecurity commuters face due to competition for jobs and the high rate of turnover. Chapter 7 shifts the focus again – to commuters’ personal lives and relationships. It focuses on the question of why commuters rush to get home after work and is, again, structured in two parts: the first part looks at women’s *own* burden of domestic labour and the second part discusses ideas about women’s ‘honour’ and the stigma that is attached to women’s mobility (and sexuality). The final data chapter, Chapter 8, focuses on commuters’ childcare responsibilities and commuters’ hopes and aspirations for the future. As we shall see, although commuters struggle to provide care for their children, they often invest significantly in their children’s education and futures – believing that education is both the key to intergenerational upward social mobility and socially empowering. Chapter 9 offers some concluding thoughts and reflections, drawing out the twin themes of precarity and pragmatism that emerge from commuters’ accounts; the chapter also discusses possible implications for policy and identifies the study’s limitations and some possible directions for future research.

Overall, then, the thesis provides a rich and detailed account of an under-researched yet significant group: commuting domestic workers in Kolkata and West Bengal. It details the experience of commuting, but it also draws attention to the *embedded* and *cumulative* nature of commuting, illustrating how commuting affects other areas of workers’ lives and making a case for commuting as a category of analysis. It highlights the intense insecurity commuters face – at work, in the city, but also more generally in their lives – and it also shows the pragmatism with which they manage this insecurity, making everyday bargains and trade-offs. The decision to commute is itself both a response to precarity and a way of managing it; it enables them to earn money and, in some cases, own land and property, but it also brings costs – in terms of time, money, and energy – which in turn bring new or different forms of precarity. While there is, then, a strong sense of hardship and suffering (*koshto*) in commuters’ accounts, there is also a prevailing sense of pragmatism, of making do and getting on – something which is, as we shall see, reflected in commuters’ language of ‘adjustment’ and the oft-repeated question, *ki korbo?* (what will I do? What else can I do?).

Chapter Two: Locating Domestic Work

In this chapter, I discuss some of the key literature on paid domestic work – both globally and in the specific case of India – tracing the main developments and discussions in the field and providing some context to my study. The chapter begins with a discussion of paid domestic work research around the world, exploring the main trends and themes in this body of work, including historical research and research on international migration for domestic work in the contemporary period. I then discuss definitional issues, including debates on ‘reproductive labour’ and ‘care’, before moving to a discussion of domestic work in India, including a more in-depth discussion of two of the most important studies on Kolkata (by Ray and Qayum and Sen and Sengupta). Finally, I discuss the literature on commuting and domestic work – again, generally, but also in the context of India – and provide a summary of the rationale for the study, indicating the other bodies of literature which are discussed and integrated within the main analysis chapters.

Locating (Paid) Domestic Work: A Global View

While unpaid domestic labour was once a key feminist issue, the question of ‘women’s work’ and its relationship to production being the subject of much debate during the 1960s and 1970s (Boserup, 1970; Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Friedan, 2010 [1963]), today it is *paid* domestic labour – which takes place in *other people’s homes* – that draws the attention of feminists. There is now a burgeoning body of literature on paid domestic work, reflecting the significant number of people – usually women – who are employed as ‘maids’, ‘nannies’ and ‘domestics’ around the world; and, unlike much of the earlier feminist writing on (unpaid) domestic labour – which was by and large produced in, and about, societies in the global North – this literature is being produced both sides of the North-South divide, by scholars (Constable, 1997; Ozyegin, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Silva, 2010), journalists (Grant, 2016), non-governmental organisations and campaigners/activists (Mehrotra, 2010; Kakande, 2016), and, in some rare cases, by domestic workers themselves (Halder, 2006). In the Indian context, the publication of Baby Halder’s autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), marks a particularly important contribution to the field,

reminding us, as Sen and Sengupta note, 'to take the question of agency seriously' (2016: 16; see also Banerjee, 2015).

With the exception of Halder's book, most autobiographical and biographical accounts of domestic service (which are themselves few and far between) are from North America and Western Europe, (see, for instance, Powell, 1968; Cullwick, 1984), as are most historical accounts – although there have been some important exceptions, including work on Northern Rhodesia/Zambia (Hansen, 1989), colonial Natal (Badassy, 2005) and colonial India (discussed later). Particularly notable is Carolyn Steedman's (2007, 2009) work on servants and masters in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, which seeks to restore the 'lost labours' of women servants, positioning them as an important, 'modern workforce' (2009: 33). The American literature also focuses on 'modernisation' (Katzman, 1978; Glenn, 1986: 143), as well as intersections of race, class and immigration (Palmer, 1989; Glenn, 1986, 1992). Phyllis M. Palmer (1989) describes how, in the years following the First World War, white, middle-class housewives freed themselves from reproductive labour by purchasing the low-wage services of poor, mainly black women. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1986) also examines the experiences of Japanese American domestic workers during the first seventy years of the twentieth century, and, in later work, illustrates that the 'racial division of paid reproductive labour', established in the USA through domestic service during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was maintained in the second half of the twentieth century as racial/ethnic minority women continued to do 'heavy, dirty, "back-room" chores' in public settings (1992: 20).

Non-historical work, from the USA and elsewhere, similarly challenges the earlier feminist formulation that domestic work is the great leveller of women. Mary Romero (1988) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), for instance, explore, respectively, the experiences of Chicana/Mexican American and Mexican undocumented immigrant women doing 'job work' in affluent, middle-class (majority white) neighbourhoods in the USA;¹⁵ while Jacklyn Cock (1980) describes the situation of black, women domestic workers in late 1970s South Africa, contextualising their 'ultra-

¹⁵ 'Job work' refers to situations where workers have several different employers and work in particular houses on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994: 51; Romero, 1988).

exploitability' within a history of racial and sexual exploitation. Additionally, Gul Ozyegin (2001) illustrates how the class subordination of rural migrant domestic workers in contemporary Ankara, Turkey 'is grounded in a tense relationship between two women who are at once "sisters" and antagonists' (2001: 22); and Bridget Anderson's (2000) study of the living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Europe in the mid-1990s demonstrates how racial stereotypes intersect with citizenship, resulting in a racist hierarchy based on skin colour, religion and nationality. Other European studies likewise underscore the importance of understanding structural inequalities in attempting to understand why some women are more likely than others to be doing paid domestic work (Lutz, 2008, 2011).

Following the emergence of the 'new global economy', the increasing availability of cheap (immigrant) labour, and the resurgence of paid domestic work in North America and Western Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a major theme in the literature on paid domestic work has been its relationship with migration and globalisation.¹⁶ This vast body of literature predominantly focuses on the experiences of migrant – particularly Filipina – 'maids' and 'nannies' in North America and Western Europe (Parreñas, 2000, 2001, 2003; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a), but also to some extent within East and Southeast Asia, which is both a sending and receiving region for migrant domestic workers (Constable, 1997). Drawing together Glenn's formulation about the racial division of paid reproductive labour and debates on globalisation and the feminisation of migrant labour, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2000, 2001, 2003) illustrates how Filipina domestic workers migrate to perform the reproductive labour of middle-class women in the global North while relegating their own reproductive labour to poorer women left behind in the Philippines. These women's migration and entry into domestic work, Parreñas argues, constitutes an 'international division of reproductive labour', which she names the 'international transfer of caring' (2000: 561). Arlie Russel Hochschild's (2000: 131) concept of the 'global care chain' builds on Parreñas's work and is now used widely across the social

¹⁶ While many upper- and middle-class families in North America and Western Europe employed domestic workers before the Second World War, in the post-war period, domestic labour was mainly the responsibility of the full-time, unpaid housewife (Oakley, 1974).

sciences to describe the move towards outsourced reproductive labour in the global North.¹⁷

The resurgence of paid domestic work in North America and Western Europe, and the increasing demand for it elsewhere – including in India – is explained in the literature in terms of a number of factors, including the increasing participation of women in the labour force, ageing populations, the intensification of work practices, changes in family structure and a shortage of public care services (Vasanthi, 2011: 85; see also Gregson & Lowe, 1994; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003b). As Anderson notes, however, this demand also has much to do with class and social status (2000: 14).

Nobody has to have stripped pine floorboards, handwash-only silk shirts, ornaments that gather dust. All these things create domestic work, but they also affirm the status of the household, its class, its access to resources of finance and personnel, and the adequacy of its manager, almost invariably a woman (Anderson, 2000: 14).

The preoccupation with class-status is particularly apparent in contexts where the ‘mistress’ does not herself work outside the home (Cock 1980; Ray & Qayum, 2010), and it also explains why, despite being referred to by employers as their ‘doubles’, domestic workers are often asked to perform tasks that their employers would themselves not undertake (Anderson, 2000: 16, 26, 114). The very hiring of a domestic worker lowers the status of the work she does, signifying that, ‘the employer has better things to do with her time’ (Anderson, 2000: 20); moreover, employing a *migrant* domestic worker, or one from a different ethnic, religious, social or caste group, promotes and perpetuates the idea that these groups are ‘natural’ servers (Anderson, 2001: 24) and thus inferior – something which in turn justifies low wages and poor working conditions (Rollins, 1985).

Because of the inherently ‘dirty’ nature of domestic work – which involves contact with other people’s dirt, waste and bodies – and the fact that this labour has been, and continues to be, carried out by marginalised groups, domestic work is also a

¹⁷ For more information about Hochschild’s ‘care chain’ theory, as well as ‘care drain’, see Hochschild, 2003; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003b. For critiques of Hochschild’s work and the ‘care drain’ perspective, as well as alternative frameworks for understanding care, see Kofman & Raghuram, 2012; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Tyldum, 2015.

stigmatised form of wage labour (albeit with some jobs/tasks being more stigmatised than others). Workers are frequently referred to as 'servants', 'maids' and 'girls' (Rollins, 1985: 159-160); and, while they are sometimes treated well by employers, becoming 'part of the family', they are also often treated as 'outsiders' and subjected to forms of caste- and class-based avoidance behaviour (Dill, 1980; Rollins, 1985; Dickey, 2000; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Moreover, because of the general lack of social and legal protection afforded to workers, and because workers are often isolated in employer's homes, they not only lack bargaining power, failing to negotiate with employers about tasks, pay and working conditions (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 246; see also Dill, 1988), but are also susceptible to abuse and exploitation (Anderson, 2000: 76-80; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 150, 174). Live-in and child workers are especially vulnerable (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 150, 174; Banerjee, 2018: 14-15), as are migrants who work with or without immigration papers (Constable, 1997: 106, 145; Anderson, 2000: 76-80).

Given the unequal power relations that lie at the heart of paid domestic work, as well as the many instances of abuse and exploitation within this sector, scholars have sought to understand how workers endure domestic work, describing their coping strategies and small acts of resistance (Scott, 1990) – including mockery (Cock, 1980), humour (Constable, 1997: 174-179; Goldstein, 2003) and feigning subservience and unintelligence (Rollins, 1985: 157-173, 194-198). Scholars have also drawn attention to workers' attempts to improve conditions and secure labour rights (Das Gupta, 2008; Sen & Sengupta 2016: 254-271). In addition, Romero has shown how Chicana/Mexican American workers in the USA have 'professionalised' and 'modernised' domestic service by rejecting a familial discourse and defining themselves as 'expert' cleaners and housekeepers (1988: 327-330; see also Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Such efforts have contributed to increasing pressure on governments to regulate domestic work, and, indeed, an International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention, C189, is now in place urging the same.¹⁸ However, because of definitional issues, and because domestic work takes place within the 'private' space of the home, most workers remain excluded from labour laws;

¹⁸ The rights protected under this legislation include the right and freedom for association, the prohibition of child labour, the protection against abuse, harassment, and violence, the right to privacy and decent living conditions, paid annual leave, and daily and weekly periods of rest (for more information, see ILO, 2018; Marchetti, 2018).

furthermore, where new, specific legislation *has* been put in place to protect workers and improve conditions, there are significant obstacles to implementation, including the problem of ‘inspection’ and the issues this raises for employers’ privacy (Vasanthi, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 231-271).

Defining Domestic Work

As indicated above, domestic work is often understood as ‘reproductive labour’ (or ‘social reproduction’), a concept first used by Northern feminist-Marxist theorists (see, for instance, Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Hartmann, 1976) and which is defined by Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner (1989: 382) as ‘the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally’ (see also Glenn 1992; Parreñas, 2000, 2012; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015: 40-66). Domestic labour is, however, sometimes understood and described, more explicitly, as a form of ‘care’ or emotion work (Roberts, 1997; Agustín, 2007: 56), the terms ‘domestic work’ and ‘care’ being used interchangeably by scholars (Blackett, 2011). Viewing domestic work as ‘care’, or using these terms interchangeably, helps, as Adelle Blackett (2011: 1) mentions, to avoid replicating the racial and class hierarchy overlaid in the distinction between ‘menial’ work typically assigned to domestic workers and ‘spiritual’ work typically reserved for the mother or mother-like figure (see also Roberts, 1997). ‘Care’ also speaks to the emotional content of specific kinds of labour, including teaching, nursing and domestic/household labour (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 14).¹⁹

Notwithstanding these points, and indeed the practical difficulty of separating ‘care’ from domestic/household labour,²⁰ scholars are wary of conflating domestic and care work. Mignon Duffy (2005), for instance, shows that with jobs and roles falling under what she calls the ‘nurturant’ care category, the emphasis is on the nature of the

¹⁹ There is also ‘affective’ labour which draws on socialist-feminist notions of ‘invisible’ labour and overlaps with reproductive labour; affective labour includes a range of services whose purpose is to make people feel in certain ways – something which is clearly relevant in the context of paid domestic work (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 146).

²⁰ Those employed to cook and clean are, as scholars note, often expected to help feed and look after children, the sick and the elderly, while those employed to care frequently perform ‘ordinary’ domestic work tasks such as washing clothes and tidying up; domestic workers also often describe their work in terms of doing ‘everything’ – something which again highlights the fluid and overlapping nature of roles/tasks within paid domestic work (Anderson, 2000: 15).

activity as inherently emotional and relational, while, with those falling under the 'reproductive labour' category, the focus is on maintaining and reproducing the labour force (or the next generation). Some reproductive labour tasks are, as Duffy notes, undoubtedly relational, and they also sometimes involve an emotional element; however, others are not relational and do not involve emotion to the same extent that nurturant care does (2005). Furthermore, while both forms of labour are heavily gendered and undervalued, in the USA, reproductive labour tends to be dominated by poor women and racial/ethnic minority women, while jobs within the nurturance framework – which are more professionalised and better-paid – tend to be dominated by white women (Duffy, 2005). Framing all care/domestic work as nurturance thus risks obscuring the differences and inequalities that structure these various kinds of work.

This point about difference and social hierarchy is particularly pertinent to discussions of domestic labour in the South Asian/Indian context given the ongoing significance of caste,²¹ as well as other markers of social difference. Scholars show that, in India, work which is typically identified as 'care work' is usually carried out by workers with a higher social standing in the caste hierarchy than those associated with the more 'menial' jobs of cleaning and washing (Raghuram, 2001; Vasanthi, 2011). Furthermore, the pay and conditions of work are often better for care workers, who are seen as more skilled and professional (Vasanthi, 2011; Banerjee, 2018: 11). While bringing together 'ordinary'/'pure' domestic work and care work conceptually may help to emphasise the comparable nature and value of these forms of labour, it is, as Nimushakavi Vasanthi (2011: 87) notes, also necessary to consider the benefits of distinguishing between the two in the Indian context. Interestingly, the aforementioned ILO Convention uses the term 'domestic work', retaining the earlier reproductive labour paradigm, as does work by Eleonore Kofman and Parvati Raghuram (2015) and Sen and Sengupta (2016). Addressing this choice, Sen and Sengupta explain that the term 'care' does not realistically describe the content of, nor relate to workers'

²¹ While definitions of 'caste' (*jati*) are contentious and interpretations often politically-swayed (Berreman, 1991), the term generally refers to the segmental division of society along lines of endogamy and hierarchy (see Gorringer, 2005; Gorringer & Rafanell, 2007; Viswanath, 2014; Vaid, 2014).

own perception of, work that is carried out by ‘maids’ in India (2016: 14) – something which will now be explored in greater detail.

Domestic Work in India

Unlike in North America and Western Europe, where paid domestic work fell away almost completely after the Second World War before resurging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in India personalised service has a long and unbroken history (Banerjee, 2004: 34; see also MacMillan, 1988; Dussart, 2015; Irfan, 2017). This history has also been shaped by two key dynamics which complicate the picture of domestic work painted so far: the social and political structures of caste, already mentioned, and colonial ideas of the ruler and the ruled. On the latter, work by Banerjee (2004), Margaret MacMillan (1988) and Fae Ceridwen Dussart (2015) illustrates how the hiring of servants was considered vital for the smooth functioning of the European/British household in India, as well as for the prestige of the British Raj, the British household becoming a symbolic microcosm of the wider imperialist project, a ‘miniature empire’ for *memsahibs*²² (MacMillan, 1988: 142). Indian servants did a variety of jobs in European/British households – jobs which, for men, ranged from the higher-ranking and better-paid *sircar/sarkar* (accountant), *khansama* (butler/head waiter) and *baburchi/bawurchee* (cook) to the lesser-ranking and less well-paid washerman, tailor and sweeper, and which for women included the *ayah* and wet-nurse, and sometimes also the sweeper and washerwoman (Banerjee, 2004: 47-51). The British generally preferred Muslim servants, believing them to be more loyal and straightforward than ‘Hindoos’; while high caste Hindu servants often refused work as cooks in European/British households, considering the food consumed therein defiling (MacMillan, 1988: 144-145).

Banerjee also shows how the emergence of a genteel Bengali middle-class – the *bhadralok* – led to an increasing demand for servants among the Bengali/Indian population in the years following 1880 (2004: 64). These servants were also often men, as well as migrants from outside Calcutta/Bengal, and, just as it did in European/British households, caste (along with religion and ethnicity) structured the

²² ‘*Memsahib*’ was a ubiquitous term under British colonialism, referring to white, upper-class women, but today it is used colloquially to connote bourgeois, westernised, upper-caste, urban women.

work and the employment relationship (Banerjee, 2004: 66-77; see also Gupta, 2018 on servant-employer relations in early twentieth-century north India). Comparing European/British and Bengali middle-class accounts, Banerjee illustrates that while the European/British saw Indians and Indian servants as dirty, lazy and physically and mentally inferior, a view which in turn legitimised European/British superiority and the colonial regime (2004: 94), servants occupied various, often contradictory positions in the middle-class Bengali perception – as ‘authoritative figures’ and ‘hapless actors’, as markers of loyalty and sacrifice and as the embodiment of loose morals (2004: 126, 164). Moreover, while there was often a degree of affection for servants in Bengali households, there was at the same time an unbridgeable social gap between masters/mistresses and servants, this relationship ultimately affirming the Hindu Bengali’s claim to cultural superiority over other ethnic communities and religions and the superior caste-class position of the master/mistress over the servant (Banerjee, 2004: 94-95).

More recent work highlights the continuing relationship between domestic work and caste, as well as its intersections with gender, class, ethnicity and religion. Scholars observe how the degree of disassociation between caste and occupation, which has occurred among the higher castes has not occurred at the level of the lower castes; ‘menial’ and ‘dirty’ jobs such as shoe-repairing and domestic work are still typically carried out by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2011: 5; see also Raghuram, 2001; Vasanthi, 2011). Domestic service also continues to draw on ‘caste-defined specialisms’ (Bayly, 1999: 314), the rigidity of caste/task-specialisation being particularly evident in the role of the sweeper/bathroom cleaner who is ‘almost always exclusively that, and always belongs to the lowest castes’ (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 76). In addition, caste flavours ‘master-servant relations’ (Frøystad, 2003). Writing about upper-caste Hindu households in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Kathinka Frøystad (2003: 81) explains that, with the shift towards apartment-living, many upper-caste employers have, rather than increasing the responsibilities of their live-in servants, employed a greater number of ‘visiting’ servants to perform specific tasks, thereby upholding spatial boundaries that reflect traditional, caste-Hindu beliefs about purity and pollution. Moreover, while practices of untouchability are ‘hardly ever talked about – and certainly not as untouchability’, employers maintain ritual and

physical distance from ‘untouchable’²³ servants – by avoiding physical proximity and so on (Frøystad, 2003: 81-82).

Frøystad’s observations are unsurprising given her field site – Uttar Pradesh, where caste-based discrimination is highly prevalent (Bayly, 1999) – and focus on upper-caste households, where concerns of purity are likely to be higher – points Frøystad herself acknowledges (2003: 74). Nevertheless, they chime with findings from other parts of India, where similar forms of physical and ritual exclusion have been documented (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sharma, 2016; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Sonal Sharma’s (2016: 52-55) Delhi study, for instance, shows that Dalit and Muslim domestic workers often find it difficult to secure better-paid cooking jobs and are generally prohibited from entering employers’ kitchens – forms of discrimination that contradict the view expressed among some workers in Sharma’s study that ‘the new generation’ does not pay much attention to caste.²⁴ Muslim workers sometimes adopt Hindu-sounding names and wear bindis and *sindoor*²⁵ when looking for work, while Dalit domestic workers often do not disclose their caste or identify as Buddhist when asked by employers (Sharma, 2016: 56; see also Rahman, 2013). By attempting to claim a higher social or caste status, however, domestic workers often end up reproducing the structures of subordination they are trying to resist. Sharma outlines how Geeta and Raj, two self-identifying Buddhists (who were ‘almost certainly Dalit converts’) would mock Dalit women’s way of ‘dressing-up’, in turn reproducing an

²³ The term ‘untouchable’ was coined by the British to describe castes seen as falling below the four main *varnas* mentioned in Hindu texts. ‘*Varna*’ refers to the pan-Indian division of society into classes based on function; ‘untouchables’, or *avarnas*, are said to lie beyond this schema. The Indian government uses the term ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SC) to refer to formerly-‘untouchable’ castes which are eligible for affirmative action measures, but this excludes converts to Islam or Christianity. Many scholars and activists prefer to use the Marathi term ‘Dalit’ (meaning ‘oppressed’ or ‘downtrodden’), which is more inclusive and less offensive than ‘untouchable’ (Zelliot, 1996; Charsley, 1996).

²⁴ Employer reservations about Dalit domestic workers have their roots in caste-based prejudice, while the stereotype of the ‘unclean’ and ‘untrustworthy’ Muslim stems from colonial rule and a Hindu nationalist ideology which constructs India as a Hindu nation and Muslims as the ‘enemy within’ (Varshney, 2003; Pandey, 2006). Anti-Muslim sentiment has also become increasingly socially-acceptable in the contemporary period (Qureshi & Sells, 2003; Fekete, 2009), with increasing intolerance in India linked to the election of a Bharatiya Janata Party national government in 2014 (Burke, 2015).

²⁵ *Sindoor* refers to the vermillion marking traditionally worn on the parting by Hindu women to signify marriage.

upper-caste discourse wherein Dalit women's femininity is constructed as 'fallen' and in opposition to that of upper-caste women (2016: 56).

In her study of middle- and upper-class households in Madurai, Sara Dickey (2000: 462) also illustrates how, in the eyes of employers, workers not only deal with dirt, but *represent* dirt, along with disease and 'rubbish' (see also Chakrabarty, 1991) from the 'disorderly outside world' – an observation which is reminiscent of Mary Douglas's (2002 [1996]: 44) work on dirt as 'matter out of place'. Pointing to employer concerns about class, Dickey argues that workers' movements in and out of employers' homes represent to employers a dangerous mixing of 'inside' and 'outside' spaces, which in turn threatens the security of their homes and their class standing (2000: 462). Employers attempt to contain this threat 'by buttressing the symbolic boundaries of the household' – that is, by controlling workers' movements and encouraging both closeness to and distance from them (Dickey, 2000: 462). Workers are thus treated kindly but addressed by their given names (rather than by more respectful kinship terms); they are also expected to dress neatly but in a manner that distinguishes them from employers (Dickey, 2000: 478-480). Explaining this careful balance between 'closeness' and 'distance', Dickey writes: 'If they [workers] are made reassuringly similar without being given too much place, the disorder of the outside can be safely incorporated into the order of the middle- and upper-class home' (2000: 480). These conceptualisations of 'order' are, however, arguably infused with concerns about caste; as scholars note, the middle-class language of 'cleanliness' and 'hygiene', which is often used by employers when talking to and about domestic workers, has its roots in ideas of caste, ritual pollution now being 'translated into real or actual dirtiness' and 'justified by the scientific discourse of hygiene' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 156-157; see also Frøystad, 2003: 84).

Two of the most important and theoretically rich studies on domestic work in India are about the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) – India's former, colonial capital. The first is Ray and Qayum's beautifully-crafted ethnography, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (2010), which explores recent transformations in the landscape of domestic work, including the shift from live-in to live-out work and from primarily men to primarily women workers, illustrating how these changes are contributing to an increasingly impersonal and transactional relationship between workers and employers. As the authors show, the shift from

(men) 'family retainer', who was known to his employers, working for them for several generations, to (women) live-out/part-time worker who is, in many cases, *unknown* to her employers, has meant a corresponding shift away from a relationship that is based on ties of affection, loyalty and dependence towards one that is based on notions of contract and wage labour (2010: 7-8, 25-26). At the same time, Ray and Qayum argue that the discourse of contract is 'at best partial and contradictory' (2010: 26), and that the feudal 'big house' remains the defining trope for understandings of domestic servitude in Kolkata/India (2010: 24). Employers and workers continue to invoke the 'rhetoric of love', a familial discourse which binds servants and masters/mistresses together and masks exploitation, even while many workers view employer claims of affection and familiarity as a ruse to make them work harder (2010: 25). Such ambivalences and tensions stem, the authors explain, 'from the peculiar nature of a culture of servitude whose definition, content, and practice were scripted in a feudal/colonial past' (2010: 26). Like in Dickey's work, 'class' is also central in Ray and Qayum's analysis; the authors note how, 'through evolving techniques of servant and home management, employers produce themselves as the class destined to lead India to modernity, and servants as a distinct class, premodern and dependent on the middle and upper classes for their well-being' (2010: 2).

Focusing specifically on the experiences of live-out/part-time workers, Sen and Sengupta's study, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (2016), is equally significant for my study on commuting workers. Like several other studies which emphasise workers' agency (see, for instance, Romero, 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Constable, 1997; Ozyegin, 2001), *Domestic Days* positions live-out/part-time workers as 'intensely engaged actors' who seek to gain advantages from, as well as challenge 'paternalist middle-class ideologies and practices' (2016: 4-5). Sen and Sengupta argue that while 'elements of servitude linger in the [employment] relationship', and workers continue to invoke paradigms of familiarity, loyalty and dependence, they do so 'no more than other categories of wage workers who claim rights and privileges in the name of custom and morality' (2016: 4). To view paid domestic work through a lens of 'servitude' is thus to overlook the complex and contested nature of the relationship between employers and workers – particularly part-time workers who are less susceptible to values of servitude and who, in most cases, describe their work in terms of *kaaj* (work/labour) (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 4).

Sen and Sengupta prefer to use their own concept of ‘pragmatic intimacy’ to describe the relationship between ‘mistress’ and ‘maid’ (2016: 150). This concept – which is evocative of Ozyegin’s (2001:142-144) ‘intimacy work’ – connotes the paradox of a relationship that is ‘at once dominating and mutual, distant and intimate, exploitative and caring’ (2016: 150). It also speaks to workers’ agency, recognising workers’ attempts to construct reciprocal relationships with employers and in turn ‘minimize conflict, ensure their own safety, facilitate a flow of benefits, and achieve a measure of dignity’ (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 177).

Like Ozyegin’s Turkish study, and like Ju-chen Chen’s (2015) work on Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, *Domestic Days* also seeks to enact a shift in the literature away from an exclusive focus on the workplace towards one that looks, more broadly, at workers’ lives and relationships.²⁶ Chapters 1 and 2, for instance, discuss workers’ profiles, living conditions, and migration histories (2016: 56-96); and Chapter 5 focuses on women’s domestic roles – as wives and mothers – illustrating how women negotiate the double burden of paid and unpaid work, and how they invest significantly in material support and education for children (2016: 178-210). Like Ray and Qayum’s study, and indeed like the wider literature on work and informality in India (Breman 1996; Gooptu, 2001, 2013; Roy, 2003)²⁷ and around the world (Hu, 2011; Standing, 2014; Alberti *et al.*, 2018), *Domestic Days* also demonstrates, more generally, the precarious balance on which workers’ wellbeing rests (2016: 282, 211-230). This story of insecurity and precarity underscores, as the authors note, the urgent need for a social security net in India (see also Vasanthi, 2011).

²⁶ Studies by Shalini Grover (2011) and Clarinda Still (2014), although not specifically studies of domestic work, similarly offer insight into the wider lives of domestic workers in India – particularly with respect to issues of ‘honour’ and ‘respectability’.

²⁷ While in Western Europe and North America, workers’ rights have been slowly stripped back in recent decades, leading to the informalisation of hitherto formal employment (Standing, 2014), in India the labour market has been historically dominated by the informal sector, with only a minority of workers being in formal employment with labour rights (Gooptu, 2013: 10; see also Breman, 1996). While ‘informalisation’ refers mainly to the erosion of previously existing job security or workplace rights, the term ‘precariat’ draws attention to precariousness, which includes the absence of steady occupational and employment opportunities (Gooptu, 2013: 11).

Commuting & Domestic Work

As noted in Chapter 1 and discussed above, there is much literature on the relationship between domestic work and migration, both globally/transnationally (Constable, 1997; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a; Parreñas, 2001) and in the more specific case of internal migration within India (Roy, 2003; Wadhawan, 2013; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 72-96; Banerjee, 2018), while very little deals with women's commutes. There has been some research on domestic work and commuting in Brazil (Goldstein, 2003) and in Turkey (Ozyegin, 2001; Erman & Kara, 2018), but very little has been undertaken in India, the small amount of work that exists on this topic having been undertaken by non-governmental organisations and social/feminist activists (see, for instance, Ghatak, 2014; Parichiti, 2015).²⁸ There has not yet been research exploring, *in depth*, what it is like to undertake these journeys (which are often long and arduous), and to combine them with a heavy burden of paid and unpaid domestic work. This gap in the literature is arguably linked to the challenges of conducting such research – with a population that is highly dispersed and constantly on the move.

Additionally, the literature on commuting consists mainly of studies which have been conducted in Western Europe and the United States – often by urban geographers – where the conditions of commuting are vastly different to those in India and where the problems of commuting remain, for the most part, confined to the commute. This scholarship highlights an increasing trend of long-distance commuting linked to rising housing prices and stagnant wages (Renkow & Hoover, 2000; Lyons & Chatterjee, 2008; Sandow, 2014); it also outlines the various challenges of commuting – including the negative effects on the environment (Tolley, 1996), as well as people's health, wellbeing, and relationships (Hoehner *et al.*, 2012; Sandow, 2014) – but also the more positive aspects of commuting. Commuting is associated, for example, with higher incomes, career opportunities and more affordable housing (Renkow & Hoover, 2000; Plaut, 2006; Sandow, 2014). Some studies also highlight the opportunities commuting

²⁸ Commuting studies are themselves rather scant in India; there are only a few studies which point to the immense scale of commuting in India, as well as to the risks in terms of passengers' safety and security (Sharma & Chandrasekhar, 2014; Hirsch *et al.*, 2016; Sharma, 2017). Moreover, commuting is not a central focus in the work on domestic work in India – it is only mentioned by Ray and Qayum and Sen and Sengupta; and, while it receives greater attention from Roy (2003), this is not a study of domestic work and commuting *per se*, but rather a study of the rural-urban interface in West Bengal.

affords in terms of thinking, relaxing, and socialising, challenging the idea that travel time is 'dead' time (Lyons & Urry, 2005; Jain & Lyons, 2008; Gately, 2014: 223-228, 237-260). However, as noted in Chapter 1, these analyses do not generally fit with the situation in India (Roy, 2003; Kusters, 2009; Hirsch *et al.*, 2016), nor indeed with the situation in many other parts of the world (Ozyegin, 2001; Goldstein, 2003; Graglia, 2016; Erman & Kara, 2018).

In this thesis, I attempt to connect the literature on domestic work in India and the literature on commuting (both generally and in the specific context of India), offering a rich and detailed account of commuting for domestic work in Kolkata and West Bengal. In the next chapter, I outline the novel methodological approaches (multi-sited and 'moving' ethnography) I adopted to produce this account, as well as the various challenges I faced in doing so; and, in Chapter 4, I provide some context to the study, discussing the profiles and backgrounds of commuters and the reasons they take up commuting for domestic work. Subsequent chapters then turn to the main analysis and in these chapters I engage with other bodies of literature not mentioned here, or not mentioned in detail. In Chapters 5 and 6, for instance, I revisit the point made in Chapter 1 about time intensification and rushing, relating this to scholarship on work, labour, and work-life balance (Hochschild, 2001; Southerton, 2003; Wajcman, 2008; Rosa, 2013); and, in Chapter 7, I discuss women's *own* domestic labour, engaging with the literature on (women's) unpaid domestic and care labour (Moore, 1992; Hochschild, 2003 [1989]; Casinowsky, 2013; Chopra & Zambelli, 2017), as well as women's 'honour' and everyday violence, engaging with the literature on gender relations and women in India. This latter body of work earlier represented poor, working-class, and Dalit women as economically independent and sexually-liberated (Searle-Chatterjee, 1981; Deliège, 1997; Parry, 2001); but, more recently – and like my research does – it has shown how these women similarly negotiate and perform 'honour' in their day-to-day lives (Grover, 2011; Still, 2014; Gorringer, 2016). Chapter 8 focuses on commuters' children and their hopes and aspirations *for their children*, engaging with wider literature on children, motherhood, consumption, and aspiration (Stivens, 1998; Donner, 2006; Pugh, 2009). Before getting to all of this, however, I discuss the methodology, providing in the next chapter an account of how I conducted the research.

Chapter Three: Researching Domestic Work

Ki bolbo? (what will I say? What can I say?) If I say, will anything change? We work so hard throughout the day, nobody knows our pain except God (Ranjani, 13.05.2015)

I want to show people how women like us travel in the train, how we suffer, hanging out of the door, so that they can understand. Many people don't leave their houses and don't travel, so don't know about any of this, how we suffer (Madhabi, 22.01.2016).

In this chapter, I outline the process by which I conducted my research, discussing the methods that I used to generate data and the various issues and challenges I faced conducting research with a group whose voices and experiences, as the above quotes indicate, have been marginalised and ignored. I begin, however, by discussing the overall research approach, including the theoretical framework and the rationale for choosing ethnographic methods. Thereafter, I discuss the processes and methods of fieldwork, my approach to analysis and writing, and, finally, ethical considerations. Although ethical issues are discussed throughout the chapter, in relation to fieldwork and analysis and writing, I discuss these separately, and in greater depth, at the end. Given the immense power imbalances and the potential for harm and exploitation that are involved in researching paid domestic work – particularly in my case, as a white, British woman doing so in postcolonial India – it has been important to consider these issues properly.

Research Approach

The research stems from an interpretivist ontological and social constructivist epistemological position, viewing knowledges as 'multiple, partial, contingent and situated' (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002: 76). It is inductive and concerned with developing theories that are grounded in the everyday activities, language, and meanings of participants (commuting domestic workers), though I recognise that, because the experiences of others are not directly knowable (Stanley & Wise, 1993: 165), what follows is ultimately *my* reconstruction of participants' accounts. I similarly recognise that a wholly 'bottom-up', grounded approach is both problematic and

unachievable since social research is framed and influenced by the knowledge, politics, and experience of the researcher (Smith, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 2001). In this thesis, then, I attempt to move between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, as well as the ‘meso’ level of analysis – consisting of family, kinship, social networks, and the state (Oishi, 2002; Agrawal, 2006) – and, in doing so, I aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of commuting domestic workers’ realities that engages with feminist and sociological discussions about gender, labour, class, and mobility.

The research is informed by critical feminist theory, which draws attention to the ‘situatedness’ of knowledge and promotes a more participatory approach (Smith, 1989; Haraway, 1988; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), and intersectionality, which draws attention to the multiple viewpoints and subject positions of individual actors (Crenshaw, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1999, 2007; Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Additionally, I draw on postcolonial theory and the subaltern studies project which have forced a ‘productive crisis’ (Mills, 1998: 99) in mainstream feminist thinking, prompting feminists to think about who they are speaking for when they speak of ‘women’ (Mohanty, 1988) and, more broadly, subjecting to scrutiny the very act of ‘speaking for’ someone else (Spivak, 1988). Locating my research within this critical, postcolonial, intersectional, feminist framework enables me to challenge assumptions of universality across women’s experiences and draw attention to an alternative and culturally-specific set of feminist issues in India; it encourages me to be critical of accepted ways of thinking about women in the global South and aware of the socio-economic, political, and cultural location from which I speak.

Although, as noted in Chapter 1, the process by which research questions were developed was highly inductive, and these questions were formulated and reformulated over time, the research developed from an initial aim of wanting to (better) understand the everyday lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers. A qualitative, ethnographic approach, combining various methods and tools, thus seemed appropriate. Speaking of her own, ethnographic approach in the classic feminist text, *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (2008 [1993]: 27), Lila Abu-Lughod writes:

By insistently focusing on individuals and the particularities of their lives, we may be better able to perceive similarities in all our lives. Of course, to say that we all live in the particular is not to say that for any of us the particulars are the same

[...] Yet the dailiness, by breaking coherence and introducing time, trains our gaze on flux and contradictions; and the particulars suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living – not as automaton programmed according to ‘cultural’ rules or acting out social roles, but as people going through life wondering what they should do, making mistakes, being opinionated, vacillating, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragic personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of laughter.

The particular ethnographic methods and tools used in my research are discussed in more detail later; first, I discuss the various phases of fieldwork, how I gained access to field sites and participants, and why and how I worked with research assistants.

Fieldwork: Multi-sited and ‘Moving’ Ethnography

The research is based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Kolkata and rural West Bengal at various intervals between September 2014 and February 2016. The first phase of this fieldwork, from September to December 2014, was dedicated to language training and negotiating access to field sites and participants; the second phase, from January 2015 to February 2016 (with several short breaks) was the main period of fieldwork, when most of the field trips and interviews were carried out. I was based in Kolkata throughout the fieldwork period, and I worked with three research assistants during this time: two assisted primarily with interpretation during field trips and interviews (Basudha until August 2015 and Sohini thereafter), and a third (Humaira) assisted with the translation and transcription of interview recordings. Conducting a multi-sited and ‘moving’ ethnography, I used a combination of participant observation (on trains, in stations, in placement agencies, and in the communities where commuting domestic workers live)²⁹ and loosely-structured interviews, informal conversations, and group discussions (with commuting domestic workers, agency managers, and NGO staff) to generate data; I also conducted a photovoice project with one key participant.

²⁹ I did not conduct participant observation in the workplace, as some researchers have done (Rollins, 1985); I also did not, for ethical reasons, actively conduct (non-participant) observation in the workplace.

Choosing the Field Sites & Negotiating Access

Although I had spent a substantial amount of time living in and learning about India prior to starting my PhD in December 2013, I had only spent a short amount of time in Kolkata, making it necessary for me to spend some time at the beginning of fieldwork learning the local language (Bengali) and developing a better understanding of the city's history, politics, and culture. For the first four months (September–December 2014), I lived with a Bengali host family in Kolkata – arranged through my language school – and attended a full-time Bengali language course at the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). Alongside language study, I used this time to build social and academic networks in the city. I already had an affiliation with the Women's Studies Research Centre at the University of Calcutta (arranged prior to fieldwork for visa purposes); but, once in the city, I also started to attend events and build networks at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata and the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University.

After a few months of living in Kolkata, I began to visit Parichiti, a local NGO which works to support and mobilise domestic workers in the city (see Parichiti, 2015). I started making regular trips to the office and later began to accompany project staff to villages where many of the domestic workers in their network lived. On these visits, I had the opportunity to meet workers, practise my language skills, and observe the work of the NGO; and traveling with project staff I learned the routes to these areas so that when I came to make these journeys myself – that is, with research assistants only – I knew the way. I met my first research assistant, Basudha, at a picnic for domestic workers arranged by Parichiti in January 2015. Studying for a master's degree in social work and having previously volunteered with Parichiti, Basudha was well-placed to assist me; and so she and I began to accompany Parichiti staff on visits, observing these visits and meetings, and, on a few occasions, conducting informal interviews with workers. However, because there was often not enough time to build trust and rapport, and we also wished to avoid 'rehearsed narratives' (Della Porta, 1992), we decided to branch out, and to visit these villages ourselves. We continued to attend Parichiti meetings and events, and we also spent time in stations, meeting and recruiting workers, who were not associated with Parichiti. In a few cases, I met and recruited workers through friends and acquaintances in the city; however, this proved ethically problematic (see 'Ethical Considerations'), and so, for the most part,

we concentrated on meeting and recruiting workers in ‘neutral’ spaces – away from employers.

To some extent, the question of how I chose my field sites and how I gained access to participants are interlinked, both being shaped, in large part, by my involvement with Parichiti. Most of my participants lived in the three commuter villages close to Sonarpur (an increasingly built-up area in South 24 Parganas, south of Kolkata),³⁰ where Parichiti held meetings with domestic workers (see Map 2; Figures 1 & 2). Others domestic workers who were not associated with Parichiti typically came from other commuter villages and peri-urban areas, often further afield but most commonly south of the city (although two women lived in Naihati, which is located towards the north). It was by a process of ‘layered access’ (Sanders, 2005: 23-27) that I built contacts and established rapport with participants, working first with and later alongside Parichiti. As part of this process, I entered into a ‘research bargain’ (Adler & Adler, 1991) with Parichiti, offering my time and energy and involving myself in the NGO’s activities in return for guidance, observational opportunities, and access to potential participants. As noted in Chapter 1, in the context of my research, a ‘commuting domestic worker’ is someone who travels to the city by train for domestic work, and so, when recruiting participants, I looked for domestic workers who lived outside the administrative heart of the city (the region stretching roughly between Dum Dum in the north and Garia in the south), and who travelled daily by train.³¹ I typically asked workers where they lived (*aapnar bari kotay?*), or if they took the train (*jokhon kaaj-e jai, tokhon train-e koren? Kaaj-e jai, train-e koren?*), recruiting them to the study (or not) depending on their answers.

³⁰ One participant worked in Sonarpur itself, which illustrates how the area is becoming increasingly urbanised and middle-class.

³¹ Although it is difficult to establish exact boundaries for Kolkata city, a distinction is often made between the administrative heart of the city, under the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), and the wider Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA), which includes North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Nadia, and Hooghly districts. For a detailed map of the KMA, see <https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/KMCMap.jsp> [accessed 31 July 2018].



Figure 1. Sonarpur Junction Railway Station. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.



Figure 2. Commuter village near to Sonarpur. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.



Working with and alongside Parichiti, I utilised a purposive sampling strategy to select and recruit 'data-rich' participants; and, as the research progressed, and I broke away from Parichiti, I used snowball sampling, which can be useful when researching hard-to-reach groups (Merrill & West, 2009). I adopted a flexible, iterative approach to determining the size and composition of the sample, aiming to conduct interviews with approximately 20-30 commuting domestic workers, and repeat interviews with a substantial number of these. I recruited new participants throughout the main period of fieldwork, until the final few months when I concentrated on following up with and saying goodbye to key participants.

Working with Research Assistants

Whilst I could speak some Bengali prior to starting the main stage of fieldwork in January 2015, it was necessary to employ research assistants. The subtle nuances of language and meaning are often only evident to native or fluent speakers; furthermore, it was important for my own safety to have someone accompany me on field visits which often involved travelling to new and unfamiliar places. Aware of the issues associated with employing interpreters/research assistants, and the effects of translation from a variety of perspectives including culture, power, and ideology (Spivak, 1992, 2000, 2001; Temple & Edwards, 2002), I carefully selected interpreters who would be able to comprehend the culture, language and the experience of participants (Choi *et al.*, 2012: 661) and interpret 'on several levels' (Freed, 1988: 318). As my participants would be mainly women, I recruited women interpreters who not only spoke Bengali fluently and were familiar with the methods and ethics of social research, but could also empathise with domestic workers. Basudha, as already mentioned, was recruited on the basis of her involvement with Parichiti, her social work experience, and her personal qualities. Sohini and Humaira were similarly skilled and empathetic; both had or were studying for masters' degrees in sociology, and, from the beginning, they took an active interest in the research, becoming, as time went on, invaluable sources of expertise and support.

Recognising that assistants are part and parcel of the knowledge production process, it was important to establish good working relationships with assistants, and to make

them feel valued and ‘heard’ within the broader contours of the research project (Temple & Edwards, 2002); this was why I explained the role in terms of ‘research assistance’, rather than merely ‘interpreting’. I was, furthermore, upfront about the pay and expectations, and I also tried to encourage an egalitarian dynamic, emphasising that we would learn and adjust together. Before starting fieldwork, I met with Basudha and Sohini to discuss the research aims and questions, and to go over plans for field trips and interviews; and, during fieldwork, we saw each other regularly, meeting for field trips several times a week, or else staying in contact by phone and email. I encouraged Basudha and Sohini to communicate the words of participants as accurately as possible, minimising their own interpretation and foregrounding the language of participants; but I also encouraged them to speak freely, ask questions, and offer suggestions on how to adjust or improve the research process. After visits and interviews, we ‘debriefed’ one another as we travelled back to the city, discussing possible meanings and issues emerging from interviews and visits. These steps did not wholly prevent issues from arising, particularly during the first few months of fieldwork when my language skills were relatively poor; however, they allowed us to develop a good working relationship where the chances of misunderstanding were reduced.

Data-Generation Methods & Data Sources

I used a combination of qualitative, ethnographic research methods, including participant observation and loosely-structured interviews, to generate data. Since domestic service is a part of the fabric of everyday life in Kolkata, observation occurred, to some extent, ‘naturally’, indeed before I started visiting Parichiti and ‘doing’ fieldwork; however, once I had decided to focus on domestic work, I carried out observation more actively, observing commuting workers in various settings, outside of work. Ethnographic observation is predicated upon attention to the everyday and enables the foregrounding of feelings, meanings, and experiences from multiple standpoints (Sanders, 2005: 23; see also Geertz, 1973); being able to observe commuters in their everyday spaces – on trains, in stations, at NGO meetings and events, at home and in their communities – thus offered valuable insight into their wider, personal lives and relationships. We (myself and assistants) were flexible about where and how we conducted fieldwork, balancing concerns about safety (our own

and that of others) with workers' schedules and preferences; consequently, we often travelled with workers to and from work, something which offered insight into the *experience* of commuting – one of the central aims of this study – but which was also, in many cases, the *only* way to meet and speak with workers. In addition, I conducted (non-participant) observation in placement agencies (or 'centres') with managers and domestic workers, some of whom were commuters.

To build trust and rapport with workers, I spent time in their communities; I helped participants' children to practise their English and I accepted invitations to take part in community activities, such as making clay oil burners in the run up to Diwali. I also brought small offerings and gifts when visiting workers' homes – often *shinghara* or *mishti*, or else colouring books and pens for workers' children – and in most cases I offered to pay for workers' train tickets when we travelled together to and from the city.³² Similarly, I generally accepted offerings of food and drink in workers' homes, aware of the social and cultural baggage attached to practices of eating and drinking. In addition, I willingly shared my own experiences – of working in a children's nursery (in the UK), or of (unpaid) domestic labour – which I believe also helped to build trust and bridge the gulf between myself and participants (see also Maher, 2000: 213; Sanders, 2005: 28). Workers were generally uninterested in my academic credentials and the finer details of my research, but rather took an interest in me, as a person; it was thus in speaking about myself – my family, my country, my life – that I managed to build rapport with participants.

In addition to observation, I conducted loosely-structured interviews, as well as more informal conversations and group discussions with commuting domestic workers and, to a lesser extent, with agency managers and NGO staff. I had initially hoped to conduct 'life story' interviews with workers (Atkinson, 1998), but, given their busy schedules and the power differential between myself and workers, I ended up conducting loosely-structured interviews, which involved various prompts.³³ Loosely-structured interviews are less hierarchical and more empowering for participants than

³² I also gave Madhabi (a key participant) a sari for Puja; and, at the end of fieldwork, when she explained that she had accidentally dropped her phone in the water behind her house, I bought her a new phone.

³³ On the few occasions I tried to initiate life story interviews with workers, beginning with broad prompts such as 'please tell me about your life', they often seemed unsure how to respond.

structured interviews (Bryman, 2012: 492). They also allow participants the space to raise issues and themes that are significant to them, something which is particularly important in exploratory projects like mine. Indeed, Chapter 8 deals with workers' hopes and aspirations for their children – a topic which would not have featured so prominently in my thesis if workers had not been given the space to talk about what was important to them. More generally, interviews helped to build a picture of workers' life and work trajectories, and to elicit core demographic information; repeat interviews tended to focus on specific areas – such as workers' relationships with employers or workers' children. In some cases, I drew on the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman *et al.*, 2004; Basu & Thomas, 2009), asking participants to reconstruct a portion of their previous day and report how they felt about doing each activity. Workers were, again, often unwilling/unable to talk about their feelings, responding by saying *ki bolbo?* (what will I say? What can I say?), but their summaries of the activities themselves offered rich detail about their daily routines and their heavy burden of unpaid domestic labour (see Chapter 7). Interviews with agency managers focused on the role of the agency and the preferences of employers; while interviews with NGO staff focused on NGO activities and the problems commuters face at work and at home.

I was flexible as to how and where interviews with workers took place, though I generally avoided conducting interviews at participants' workplace. Some of the interviews – both with workers and agency managers – were quite short and more like conversations (20 minutes, 30 minutes), while others lasted between 40 minutes and an hour and a half and covered a range of topics, often in-depth. Sometimes, I spent a few hours with workers, chatting with them at various points and in various spaces – on the train, on the walk from the station near their homes, and inside their homes. Later, when I came to transcribe and translate these recordings with Humaira, I created single transcript files for participants, adding new transcripts to existing files in cases of repeat interviews. I also added field notes to the bottom of these transcripts to engage with the data from an early stage. I typically typed field notes on the same day or on the day after field trips, using hand-written notes I had taken during or immediately after visits, when my memories were still fresh; in a few cases, I was too tired, unwell, or upset to tackle this work immediately and so waited a few days to do

it, although this obviously had implications for how many of the smaller details I could remember.

My final sample included interviews with 31 commuting workers and repeat interviews with 5 of these. Repeat interviewing provides an opportunity for extended discussion and reflection at mutually convenient times; it also allows the researcher to pay attention to the details of a participant's life over time (Maher, 2000: 216-217). In my case, however, repeat interviewing was not always possible given the lack of time and opportunity to build trusting, reciprocal relationships with workers. Some workers also moved or changed their phone numbers during fieldwork, meaning that they could not be reached after initial interviews. In addition, because of workers' busy schedules and the unequal power relation between myself and workers, I was worried that workers would be unwilling to say if they did not want me to visit them again,³⁴ and that the promise of a second or third visit might heighten workers' expectations about the research encounter and what I could do for them. These ethical issues are discussed in greater detail later; the point I wish to make here is that while I was able to build trusting, reciprocal relationships with some workers, visiting these workers every few weeks for over a year, others I only met or spoke to once. This imbalance is reflected in the analysis, where I draw largely on interviews with this smaller group of workers.

In addition to observation and interviews, I conducted a photovoice project with one key participant (Madhabi). Visual methods, in particular photo-elicitation, have been used to explore people's stories and perspectives in a variety of research settings, including in research with domestic workers (Cornwall *et al.*, 2010). Researchers usually combine photo-elicitation with interviewing, using photographs produced either by themselves or by research participants to stimulate discussion; the latter is more popular and known as 'auto-driving' (Heisley & Levy, 1991) and 'auto-driven photo-elicitation' (Samuels, 2004). Using images created and composed by research participants provides a greater opportunity for them to disclose their own sense of

³⁴ Clarinda Still (2014: 23) notes that the presence of social researchers in poor and rural parts of the world is enabled by global class-based structural inequalities, 'which always render the poor more accessible than the rich'. The fact that I could travel to India, visit commuters' villages, enter their homes, play with their children, eat their food, and later write this thesis is all evidence of this.

meaning to the researcher (Samuels, 2004: 1530); putting cameras in the hands of participants and inviting them to analyse their own photographs can also be a corrective to academic distancing (Gold, 2004: 1554), and a potentially empowering experience for participants (Maher, 2000; Frith & Harcourt, 2007). Furthermore, participant-led analysis of their own photographs has been found to yield richer information than that generated by traditional, word-only interviews (Samuels, 2004; Frith & Harcourt, 2007). In my case, conducting a photovoice project not only offered an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of commuters' everyday routines, movements, and spaces (and the meanings attached to these), but also to make the research more participatory and enjoyable for participants.

Although I had initially hoped to conduct the project with several key participants, in the end, I only did so with Madhabi. It took longer than anticipated to carry out the project with Madhabi; and, as fieldwork progressed, it became clear that she was in fact the *only* participant with whom I could realistically carry out this project. Madhabi had expressed an interest in taking photos, and, by June 2015, when I first suggested the idea to her, she and I had developed a good relationship; because of this, I felt that she would be likely to tell me if she was uncomfortable using the camera or taking part in the project. Madhabi was, anyway, excited about the project and so I gave her a simple-to-use, point-and-shoot digital camera and explained what I envisaged for the project. I told Madhabi that, if she was happy with the plan, I would leave the camera with her for a week, for her to take photographs of places, people, and objects that meant something to her. I showed her how to use the camera and we spent the rest of the afternoon practising – taking photos together in her home and village. Madhabi picked it up easily and seemed to enjoy using the camera, as well as the attention we attracted from passers-by. I provided some ethical guidelines (discussed later) and explained that I had included in the camera case an information sheet with my photo and details. I instructed Madhabi to show this to people if they started asking questions, and told her that she could pass on my number, or Basudha's, if anyone required more information. After a week, I visited Madhabi again to see how she was getting on and to ask her if she wanted to display some of the photographs at the next Parichiti picnic (in February 2016); she seemed keen and so, after another few weeks, I returned to Madhabi's house and we selected the photos we wanted to print and display at the picnic, as well as some others she wanted to keep for herself. In August,

I returned with two sets of photos and we sat for a while on her bed discussing why she had taken these photos and what they meant to her. Before the picnic, I also printed the photos we had selected in a larger size and stuck them onto pieces of coloured card for the display; staff from Parichiti organised pieces of string to be pinned up on trees at the venue, and, when we arrived Madhabi and I displayed them for the others to enjoy (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Madhabi's photos on display at the Parichiti picnic. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2016.

The picnic exhibition was, I think, a success.³⁵ Throughout the day, attendees (city-dwelling and commuting domestic workers) came over to have a look, and I had opportunity to ask them what they thought about the photos. This prompted some interesting discussions – about the difficulties of commuting and the rainy season, for example – and afterwards I made notes of what was said. Madhabi also said a few words at the picnic, about how she had learned to use the camera and how she had enjoyed the project, reiterating what she had told us a week earlier as we chatted in the field behind her house. The quote at beginning of chapter was also what Madhabi said when I asked her what she thought her employers would say if they could see the photos. Some of the photos Madhabi took are displayed and analysed in the following chapters; similarly, I reflect on what she said about these photos, treating this too as primary data.

³⁵ I held a similar exhibition at the University of Edinburgh once I had returned from fieldwork.

In addition to the methods outlined above, I also draw on the many informal conversations and group discussions I had during fieldwork – with domestic workers (both commuting and city-dwelling), agency managers, NGO staff, and middle-class friends and acquaintances – and on newspaper articles, films, and novels, which offer a sense of the public perception about domestic work and workers in Kolkata and India. Similarly, I reflect on the personal diary I kept during fieldwork, although I do not refer to this directly in the following analysis.

Fieldwork Challenges

One of the greatest challenges I encountered during fieldwork was that of arranging visits to workers' homes and finding the time to talk. As noted already, it is not difficult to meet domestic workers in Kolkata, but finding the time to sit down and talk, uninterrupted, is often *incredibly* difficult. Where we had already established relationships with workers and where these workers had phones, we generally called ahead; however, even in these cases, we often found, having arrived at workers' homes, that their circumstances had changed and they could no longer talk. Not all participants had phones, moreover, and those that did sometimes lost/broke them or changed their numbers, the latter, in some cases, because their phones had been taken or destroyed by husbands and sons. In many cases, then, we were forced to turn up at workers' homes unannounced, which sometimes brought opportunities to meet and talk to new workers (for instance, en route to these places), but at other times meant that we faced the same difficulties outlined above.³⁶ Because there was often a lack of time, we could not, in many cases, carry out the type of lengthy, in-depth interviews we aimed to conduct but rather had to settle for snippets of conversations on the back of van-rickshaws or squashed up against one another on trains – indeed anywhere that it seemed possible and safe to talk. Therefore, while 'mobile methods' provided insight into the commute, this was often literally the *only* way to talk to workers.

³⁶ Key participants sometimes told us that they were too busy to meet when we called ahead to arrange visits, which perhaps reflects the level of trust and rapport we had established with these participants (that they could ask us *not* to come), but at the same time might suggest something about the changing views of participants in relation to the research i.e. that they found our visits and conversations less rewarding as time went on.

Another problem we faced was that of finding workers' homes, particularly if we had only visited them once or had only vague directions from workers. In many cases, we ended up becoming lost in commuter villages, something which in the summer meant spending long periods exposed to the sun and heat (and thus, on several occasions, later suffering with sun stroke). The same often happened when trying to locate agencies in Kolkata. In many cases, we found information about agencies online and in newspapers; however, even when we called ahead to confirm addresses, they were sometimes not where they said they would be and those who lived nearby often had no idea what we were talking about when we mentioned that we had come to find an agency. It is possible that we had been given the wrong addresses purposefully; many of these agencies are, as Sen and Sengupta note, unregistered, fly-by-night establishments (2016: 250-253). Other, practical issues we faced on such trips, and especially on those which lasted longer than we had expected or planned, was finding women's toilets. The lack of (usable) toilets in stations and on trains meant having to go several hours without using the toilet – a problem that is experienced daily by workers (see Chapter 5).

The commute itself was often incredibly strenuous and exhausting, particularly during peak hours, Durga Puja³⁷ and the rainy season (mid-June to September), when there were regular train delays and cancellations which in turn caused extreme overcrowding on trains and in stations (see Chapter 5). During the rainy season, participants' villages flooded and became water-logged for weeks at a time, making it both practically difficult and ethically problematic to visit workers during this period; in a few cases, workers asked us not to come, explaining that they were concerned about our safety but also noting that it was, for them, a bad time. Workers' homes in many cases suffer terrible damage during heavy rain (see Chapter 7), but there is also a high(er) incidence of stomach-related illness due to the contamination of the water supply and an increase in bacteria; we too often fell ill with sickness and diarrhea during the summer and rainy months. For various reasons, then, fieldwork in the summer and rainy season was slow and difficult. Whilst I continued to make trips to villages in cases where I felt it safe and appropriate to visit workers, for the most part, I concentrated on visiting agencies in the city and on transcription/translation and

³⁷ Durga Puja, sometimes referred to as 'Puja' or 'Pujo', is the most significant religious festival for Bengali Hindus.

coding. The disruption caused to my fieldwork in the rainy season and the necessity of having to take breaks *throughout* fieldwork (which I had not fully appreciated until I was doing it), was why, in Jan 2016, I decided to extend my fieldwork by two months.

There were, in addition, challenges during visits and interviews. Sometimes, there were misunderstandings between myself and research assistants, as well as between myself, research assistants and participants; and participants were also not always forthcoming. Commuters were sometimes suspicious of me, assuming, understandably, that I was from a Christian organisation or political party (see also Still, 2014: 19-20; Parichiti, 2015: 4-5). In other cases, they were simply too busy or too shy to talk; and, as the quote at the beginning of the chapter indicates, in a few cases, they could not see the point in talking, responding to our invitation by saying, 'What can I say?' or 'Will talking to you give us better work?' Several also downplayed their right to speak, referring us to Parichiti staff or men (husbands and sons) to speak for them – a problem that was similarly encountered by Sen and Sengupta (2016: 48-49). In initial interviews and those where we were unable to establish trust and rapport, commuters also often gave short, standard responses – 'my employers are good'; while others changed their stories, depending on the level of trust and rapport we had established and, importantly, who else was in the room. Interviews frequently turned into group discussions, involving other women (daughters, sisters, mothers/mothers-in-law, neighbours) but also other men (husbands, sons, brothers, fathers/fathers-in-law, neighbours). These men sometimes interrupted their wives and daughters (our participants) and participants too sometimes lowered their voices or changed the topic when men joined us. Because of ideas to do with women's 'honour', commuters were, it seemed, keen to perform 'respectability' in front of these others, and their accounts are consequently full of inconsistencies and contradictions.

Furthermore, I encountered difficulty in asking about and interpreting participants' responses about caste. I struggled to find appropriate ways of asking about caste: direct questions such as 'what is your caste (*aapnar jath ki*)?' felt too direct and too insensitive (especially given the historic and continuing association between paid domestic work and low-caste status); and on the few occasions when I *did* ask such questions, participants either appeared not to know or wish to disclose their caste identity. Asking for workers' surnames or if they had caste-related documents (ID cards, certificates) seemed similarly intrusive/inappropriate, although, where workers

did know and disclose their caste, they sometimes themselves mentioned such documents:

Lauren: what caste are you?

Santi: Scheduled Caste.

Lauren: Do you know the name?

Santi: I'm absolutely scheduled caste – we have a 'certificate' (30.11.2015).³⁸

When I tried to inquire about caste in a more indirect way – for instance, asking about the backgrounds of children's marriage partners or whether workers received any special entitlements from the government (on the basis of caste) – it was often difficult to interpret workers' responses, or to infer from them any sort of conclusion about caste. Initially, I assumed that these difficulties were the result of my own inability to read between the lines, my lack of cultural knowledge and understanding; however, the fact that my research assistants too often struggled to interpret these responses, or to infer from them anything about caste, points to a wider silence and lack of clarity around issues of caste in Kolkata/West Bengal, which is in part a reflection of the persisting stigma around low-caste status (see also Guha, 2018: 56), but also likely connected to the repression of a political discourse on caste in this context (Samaddar, 2013; Ghosh, 2014). Because caste did not emerge as an important category/theme in interviews with workers, and because there was often little time and opportunity to talk, I eventually stopped asking about this, prioritising issues and topics that seemed important to participants. Caste is thus discussed only indirectly in the following chapters, in relation to avoidance behaviour at work, for example. What *did* emerge, and what *is* discussed in some detail in the following chapters, however, is the distinction Hindu participants often made between themselves, as Hindu, and others, as Muslim – as well as a more general theme of discrimination against Muslim workers. Indeed, while Santi did not seem bothered about revealing her caste status, adding that she had a certificate stating such, she followed up by saying: 'At least we're not Muslim. Some people come from Bangladesh but we are *ghotis* (Indian Bengalis)' (30.11.2015).

³⁸ Throughout the thesis, I use single quotation marks to denote when a participant used an English word.

The Sample

I conducted loosely-structured interviews with 31 commuting domestic workers, although as noted already, there was great variation in terms of the duration and the richness of data generated by these interviews. I also conducted interviews with owners/managers at nine placement agencies (although, again, some of these were much shorter than others), and informal conversations with domestic workers in these spaces. Of the 31 commuters I interviewed, I carried out repeat interviews with 5 (Madhabi, Shobna, Priya, Santi, and Madhumita); and I met and spoke to several others more informally (whom I had earlier interviewed) throughout the fieldwork period. 28 of the 31 commuters in my sample were women. I had not anticipated finding men who commute for domestic work since most domestic workers in Kolkata are women and men working in domestic service in Kolkata typically work as drivers, living in most cases with or near to their employers in the city. However, because I came across 3 men (Arun, Sumit, and Mansoor) who fit my broad definition, and because two of the three interviews I conducted with these men (Arun and Mansoor) elicited rich data, I decided not to exclude them from the study. Arun (45) worked as a driver, Sumit (39) worked as a 'male attendant' (through an agency), and Mansoor (28) did all kinds of work – running errands, cleaning and fixing things, working in the family shop – for a middle-class family he had previously lived and grown up with. I similarly chose to include *ayahs* (carers) in the study; they accounted for 5 of the 31 commuters (including Sumit, the 'male attendant') and they all worked through agencies, in ten or twelve hour shifts. Other participants did *thike kaaj* (cleaning work) and/or *rannar kaaj* (cooking work), typically working directly and for short periods in several different homes daily.

The next chapter includes more detail about the backgrounds and profiles of participants; here, I provide a short summary. Most were in their twenties, thirties, and forties; the youngest (Santi) was aged 26 and the oldest (Charu) was 52.³⁹ All were or had been married (often below the age of 16): one woman (Ruksana) was a widow, another (Madhabi) had been abandoned by her husband, and a third (Anjali) had left her husband because of his drinking and abuse. All participants had children; most

³⁹ Many participants did not know their age or have official documents stating their age; in this thesis, I have thus included details of approximate ages for participants at the time when I knew them.

had between one and three children, and many had just one child, indicating a trend of small(er) families.⁴⁰ A few participants lived with or near to extended family, but most lived with their husbands and children only. Most had little or no formal education, though one or two could read and write. Many had been taken out of school and sent for *khawa-pora kaaj*,⁴¹ often following a father's illness, injury or death. Others took up domestic work later, once they were married, preferring this work over other informal sector options – tailoring work, shop work, construction work – which they felt did not offer the same degree of respectability, flexibility, and security.

28 of the 31 participants were Bengali Hindus, many being from more rural, southerly areas of South 24 Parganas, including the Sundarbans.⁴² Only 3 (Fatema, Ruksana, and Mansoor) were Muslim, one of these (Ruksana) having migrated with her parents from Bangladesh as a child.⁴³ Although many of my participants did not appear to know or wish to disclose their caste, 7 of the 26 Hindu women identified as SC. Additionally, 3 Hindu women (Malika, Durga, and Kabita) reported being 'higher caste', which could either indicate that they belonged to the middling castes, sometimes referred to as the 'general category', or that they did not belong to, or wish to be associated with, the *lowest* castes. Considering the persisting association between paid domestic work and low-caste workers/status, however, it is likely that these three 'higher caste' participants, along with others who either did not appear to know or disclose their caste, also belonged to the SCs (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 75). Interestingly, although I did not ask for workers' surnames, 10 participants volunteered this information and of these 10, 6 had the surname 'Mondol' (5 of these 6 also reporting that they were either SC or 'higher caste'). The surname 'Mondol' (or

⁴⁰ Sen and Sengupta found that city-dwelling domestic workers (and arguably other kinds too) often opt for sterilisation – a practice that has a contentious history in India but which nevertheless continues to take place on a large scale (2016: 216; see also Barry & Dugger, 2016).

⁴¹ '*Khawa-pora kaaj*' literally means 'work that provides food and clothing', but more generally refers to work which requires the worker to live-in, in the home of their employer. As noted, this arrangement is now less common than it used to be in Kolkata.

⁴² The Sundarbans, meaning 'beautiful forest' in Bengali, is an extensive mangrove forest and eco-region of recognised significance that extends approximately 260 kilometres along the Bay of Bengal from the Hooghly river estuary in India to the Meghna river estuary in Bangladesh.

⁴³ This imbalance, which is noted in other studies too, is likely connected to the fact that most of my participants worked in southern Kolkata neighbourhoods where there are a greater number of Hindu households – and to the fact that Hindu employers generally prefer to employ Hindu workers (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 75; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 68).

'Mandal', 'Mondal'), as Annu Jalais (2010: 52-53) explains, is the most common name of the 'down' islands of the Sundarbans (where several of my participants had migrated from), often being adopted by islanders whose surnames connote traditional caste occupations (boatmen, fishermen).

Analysis and Writing

A story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience.

- *Lila Abu-Lughod, 2008 [1993]: 15*

Although the nature of the ethnographic encounter dictates that the various stages of conducting research – gaining access, selecting a sample, carrying out interviews and analysing data – are not only recurrent, but also concurrent (Maher, 2000: 207), the first 'proper' stage of analysis was arguably that of transcription and translation. Since all participants agreed to have their interviews recorded, I started to transcribe/translate early on in fieldwork. Initially, I transcribed interviews with my Bengali teachers during private language classes; however, most were transcribed by myself and Humaira between January and December 2015; several were also completed by Sohini towards the end of fieldwork. Humaira did most of the translation work to begin with while I took detailed notes; however, with time, and as my language skills improved, I took a more active role in translation and Humaira and I had many meaningful conversations about the data. As noted earlier, I added field notes to transcript files, as well as details of conversations I had had with Humaira whilst transcribing/translating. Since there was frequently a backlog of recordings, I prioritised those which I felt elicited the richest data. During the rainy season, I started to code data, at first using NVivo software and later manually – printing out transcripts and highlighting key themes and phrases. I similarly started to write analytical memos for my supervisors, which we would then discuss over email and Skype. When I returned to Edinburgh in March 2016, I thus had a sense of the key questions and themes emerging from the research, although these evolved after I revisited the key literature and immersed myself more fully in the data.

As in fieldwork, I encountered various difficulties when interpreting and analysing my data. Due to the issues outlined earlier (including the lack of privacy during interviews and women's concerns with performing 'respectability'), commuters' accounts were

often difficult to piece together and make sense of – particularly if we had attempted to discuss sensitive issues, such as participants' relationships with husbands. Due to the extreme heterogeneity of the sector, it was also difficult to interpret participants' comments about work and employers, and to develop a clear understanding of wages and working hours; moreover, since some interviews were very short, and I was also keen to let participants speak about issues and topics that were important to them, I did not always generate data on these topics. Additionally, I struggled in early drafts to reflect on my own emotions and feelings during fieldwork, which is arguably necessary for a truly reflexive approach (Bondi, 2005; Brownlie, 2011). When writing about encounters with commuters' husbands, or with men whom I encountered more generally during fieldwork, I initially interpreted these encounters in terms of *the men's* embarrassment and shame, neglecting to consider the role that *my own* feelings of discomfort had played in these encounters and my subsequent readings of them (see Chapter 4; Pillow, 2003).

More generally, I experienced tensions when interpreting and editing participants' accounts. Interpretation is not only unavoidable since researchers cannot set aside their language, life, and understandings when they produce their accounts (Smith, 1989: 43); it is, as Abu-Lughod notes, necessary, the researcher's task being to make participants' stories 'readable' – a process which involves 'cutting the uninteresting, avoiding the repetitive, giving translations and providing intelligibility' where needed (2008 [1993]: 33-34). I therefore employed an interpretive and reflexive reading of the data, demonstrating sensitivity to a range of interpretations and voices within the data and remaining critical of my own ontological and epistemological assumptions throughout. Believing knowledge(s) to be situated, I do not draw on conventional measures of reliability, representativeness, and replication to demonstrate the validity of my research. I also did not share transcripts or negotiate matters of interpretation with participants, though I often 'checked' information during repeat visits; giving participants transcripts to read and comment upon would have been inappropriate and unproductive given participants' low levels of literacy. Following Abu-Lughod and others, I have rather endeavoured to make clear the grounds on which I have made certain selections and interpretations, retaining much of the language that was used

by participants in interviews and conversations and providing Bengali translations where appropriate (2008[1993]: 18; Mason, 2002).

Ethical Considerations

The telling of a story of a life is a deeply problematic and ethical process in which researchers are fully implicated. In the hands of a novice researcher – and especially say a student rushing in to gather a life story for a dissertation – such awareness may be very thin and the damage that could be done, enormous.

- *Kenneth Plummer, 2001: 224*

A comprehensive ethical review was conducted and approved by the University of Edinburgh ethics committee prior to starting fieldwork. However, because the focus of my research changed once I was in Kolkata, and because it is recognised that ‘the outsider self never simply stands outside’ (Abu-Lughod, 2008 [1993]: 40), it has been important to reflect on ethical issues, including the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of my research and the implications of my positionality (my ‘race’/ethnicity, nationality, age, class, and gender) *throughout* the research process. On a practical level, maintaining a personal, reflexive diary during fieldwork allowed me to reflect on my own thoughts and feelings; and, similarly, discussing ethical issues and dilemmas with supervisors and peers during and after fieldwork enabled me to work through some of these issues and dilemmas.

Embodied Ethnography, Self and the ‘Research Gaze’

Entering the personal worlds of others is, as Kenneth Plummer (2001: 224) highlights, an inherently ‘problematic and ethical process’ involving concerns of confidentiality, deception, exploitation, betrayal, authorial authority, and representation (see also Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Fine, 1994; Nagar, 2003). These dilemmas are compounded in contexts where there are significant wealth disparities and power asymmetries between researchers and participants, and where, as in my case, the knowledge-production project is ‘not easily separated from the “process of empire”’ (Said, 1989: 214). Additionally, in research involving poor and marginalised groups, the potential for exploitation (also) lies in the fact that researchers often construct data

from the hardship and tragedy in participants' lives (Still, 2014: 24-25), and that participants typically gain much less from the research encounter than the researcher (Omvedt, 2003: 314). The use of qualitative and ethnographic methods in no way diminishes these various dilemmas (Caplan, 1997: 17; Stacey, 1988). Indeed, for all her good intentions of 'writing against culture', Abu-Lughod admits to feeling 'uneasy' after realising that she had 'made public the narratives that women told only to specific others' and 'made permanent what was meant to be fleeting', ultimately proceeding with her own vision of what she wanted (2008 [1993]: 37-38). Summarising these concerns, Plummer comments:

The potential harm and damage, the sheer intrusiveness into someone else's life, the bare-faced cheek to believe that one can simply tell another's story, the uncritical self-satisfaction of telling another's story, the frequent arrogance of 'colonizing' their world view – all this needs to be considered (2001: 225).

While questions of 'voice' and representation have, rightly, become a point of contention in ethnographic and feminist research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Fine, 1994; Nagar, 2003), it is at the same time recognised that abandoning ethnographic and cross-cultural fieldwork in favour of research 'closer to home' does not necessarily resolve these issues and dilemmas (Maher, 2000: 207-209). Furthermore, while in some contexts 'marginal' groups are now speaking for themselves and writing their own ethnographies, in others the need for mediators continues. Halder's autobiography, as mentioned in Chapter 2, remains a rare example of domestic workers – in India but also more generally – speaking for themselves (2006). Grappling with these complex issues, some scholars have called for a more critical and reflective/reflexive model of ethnography, where the ethnographer positions herself/himself, humbly, as a 'record keeper' or 'minor historian' of 'ordinary lives' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992: 29), or else as a 'mediator between worlds' (Abu-Lughod, 2008 [1993]), with an emphasis on dialogue and collaboration with participants (see also Caplan, 1997; Nagar & Sangtin Writers, 2006). Pat Caplan's (1997) life story of Mohammed, a villager on Mafia Island, Tanzania, with whom Caplan established a relationship over almost three decades, is an excellent example of collaborative and reflexive research. Likewise, *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006) presents the story of eight 'sister-activists' in Uttar Pradesh, interweaving the narratives of seven

of these women and operationalising the type of truly collaborative approach – theory as praxis – that feminist researchers often strive for.

Whilst I was unable to form genuine *partnerships* with participants – given time constraints, language and cultural barriers, and ever-present power relations – it was nevertheless important to encourage a more equitable relationship between myself and participants and to try to write ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ them (Sultana, 2007: 375; Caplan, 1997; Nagar & Sangtin Writers). As noted earlier, the first part of my fieldwork involved spending time in commuters’ homes and communities and establishing a level of trust and rapport with participants. I did not, fundamentally, view establishing and maintaining a field presence as about gaining a ‘pass to the exotic world of the “other”’, but about creating and sustaining a dialogic encounter (Maher, 2000: 212; see also: Caplan, 1997, Nagar & Sangtin Writers, 2006); and whilst writing, I have endeavoured to construct a ‘record’ of a group of people who have been marginalised in society and in the literature, and, while the account that follows ultimately represents *my* interpretation of *their* lives, I have tried to portray them as fairly as possible, reflecting on my own role within the research process and tracing the routes by which I think I have produced certain interpretations (Maher, 2000: 208; Abu-Lughod, 2008 [1993]: 18, 29).

Recruiting Participants

As noted earlier, I generally avoided meeting and recruiting participants in the workplace, concentrating more on ‘neutral’ spaces such as trains and train stations. The reason for this was that when I *had* met workers in employers’ homes, it had raised serious ethical issues. During one such meeting, in May 2015, Basudha and I arrived at my friend’s house one morning around eleven as planned, expecting a brief introduction to my friend’s domestic worker, Charu (52), and possibly an opportunity to arrange to meet and talk to Charu another time, in a different space. When we arrived, however, my friend asked Charu to join us in the living room and then proceeded to speak about her and ask her questions – presumably, for our benefit. The dynamic felt stilted and I grew increasingly uncomfortable, not sure how long this would go on for and worried about what Charu was thinking and feeling as she sat opposite us, politely responding to her employer’s comments and questions with an

indecipherable smile on her face.

My friend also explained that she had arranged for Charu to take me and Basudha to her village, that same day, so we could see where and how she lived. I was taken aback and worried about whether Charu had wanted us to go with her, but, at the same time, felt I could not refuse; arrangements had been made and I did not want to disappoint my friend, or Charu, whose expression, as noted, was difficult to read. As the morning unfolded, however, my reservations only grew stronger. Charu was, at 52, not only the oldest woman in my study; she also had one of the longest and toughest daily commutes I encountered during fieldwork (see Chapter 5), and while she had been in good spirits at the beginning of the journey, after lunch she became increasingly quiet and withdrawn, likely exhausted from her morning of work. Moreover, talking to Charu about her own burden of domestic labour underscored the discomfort and guilt I had been feeling for having agreed to my friend's plan; I felt uncomfortable knowing that on top of having had to work all morning in the city, and commuting back and forth, Charu had been asked to act as tour guide for me and Basudha, possibly without any additional remuneration from my friend. Indeed, given what I had learned about commuters' (lack of) bargaining power, it seemed highly likely that Charu had felt obliged to agree to take us with her – with or without payment – although she hid any frustration she may have been feeling well.

Managing Expectations

Given commuters' hectic schedules and their vulnerable economic position, it was important not to impose additional burdens or expectations on participants during fieldwork. I was aware that asking them to sit down and talk with me was already asking a lot, and so I tried to make it clear that I did not expect special treatment, even though commuters did very often – and despite my protests – insist on offering us drinks and snacks.⁴⁴ On occasions where I had not been able to communicate this, I also became acutely aware of the burden this had placed on commuters and their families – in terms of both time and money. Indeed, the morning when we accompanied Charu back to her village, she told us that her daughter-in-law had

⁴⁴ Taking sweets and snacks ourselves helped to diffuse this dynamic, and, as time went on, key participants generally stopped offering (or offering as much) food and drink.

prepared lunch and later we saw this woman unwrapping what looked to be new plates and cups from plastic packaging (it was unclear whether she had been given any extra money to buy this food – or indeed these plates and cups). In other cases, it was less clear why commuters behaved kindly towards us, or why they so readily opened up to us. Many seemed pleased that we had taken an interest in their lives (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 22), remarking on our ability and willingness to travel to their communities, which, they noted, employers never did. In Madhabi's case, our visits also seemed to bring her increased status in her community, where she was, as a single and outspoken woman, ordinarily something of an 'outsider'.⁴⁵ In some cases, however, commuters appeared to have certain ideas about who we were and what we could do for them. Some asked if we could help with their children's or grandchildren's education, or if we had come to help build hospitals and schools, presuming that we were doctors or NGO workers come to offer practical forms of assistance.

Although I tried to manage participants' expectations, explaining as best I could the aims of the research and that I could not offer anything in return for interviews, there were occasions when it appeared that this message had not been communicated clearly-enough. On my second visit to Mithu's home (in September 2015), Mithu (45) became upset talking about her finances and, afterwards, I wondered if by visiting her for a second time, I had given her (false) hope of being able to provide practical, financial support. While my first visit to her home had been calm and pleasant, the heavy conversation about Mithu's work and financial situation broken up with some lighter moments shared over cups of tea or as we strolled around the village, this time Mithu seemed distressed and started talking, hurriedly and unprompted, about her worries and concerns. She explained that there was nobody to help look after her and her husband (their daughter, their only child, had married and moved away), and at one point she took Sohini's hand, pleading with us directly for help. We tried to comfort Mithu, explaining that we would, with permission, pass her details to Parichiti (who could provide other, non-financial forms of support); however, this did little to console her and she continued to be upset even when we left her house a little while later,

⁴⁵ Still also found being a 'Western' woman and an 'outsider' led to her forming close relationships with women who were less concerned with shame/modesty (2014: 22-23).

apologising for not being able to do more.⁴⁶ Although there are various possible explanations for what had happened – including that Mithu’s financial situation had worsened, or that she had simply felt more comfortable talking openly and asking for help without her husband, who was on this occasion at work – I nevertheless decided after this visit to think more carefully about conducting repeat interviews with participants. Indeed, afterwards, I only pursued repeat visits in cases where workers absolutely insisted that we continue to visit them; and I also avoided staying too long in commuters’ homes when we *did* make visits. Similarly, I ruled out staying overnight in commuters’ homes (which I had earlier considered), even though this would have offered invaluable insight into their morning routines and journeys.

Working with Research Assistants

Decisions about whether and how much to remunerate interpreters and research assistants are laden with ethical concerns, even though, as some scholars note, these concerns are typically glossed over in researchers’ accounts (Molony & Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010). Indeed, given the importance of establishing a good, cooperative working relationship with assistants, it was important to pay them properly and to ensure that they felt valued within the research process (Molony & Hammett, 2007). I thus asked fellow researchers in Kolkata for advice on how much to pay assistants and balancing this advice against my own desires to ‘help out’ assistants in the context of wealth disparities, I settled on a series of amounts (for field-visits, transcription etc.); I wanted to be generous, but simultaneously considered my budget and how being *overly*-generous might give me an unhelpful reputation, jeopardising wider relations (Molony & Hammett, 2007). Although my assistants seemed happy with the pay I offered, and I also tried to be as clear as possible from the outset about what would be expected of them, I nevertheless recognised that paying them might make it difficult for them to refuse my requests later (Bøås *et al.*, 2006); and, moreover, that assistants might become less happy with the pay over time, particularly if their interest in the project waned or as the realities of the research – the physical demands, the emotional strain – became clearer. Again, then, it was important to make assistants

⁴⁶ As it was for Still, being asked by participants for help that I could not provide was one of the most difficult aspects of fieldwork (2014: 19-20).

feel valued and heard within the project, to be flexible about how/where/with whom the research took place, and, fundamentally, to be understanding if another, more worthwhile opportunity came along for assistants – which was indeed the case with Basudha who got a full-time job halfway through my fieldwork.

I was, in addition, concerned about the safety and wellbeing of assistants during fieldwork given both the physical demands and the emotional strain. Journeys to participants' homes were often difficult and strenuous; interviews with commuters, moreover, often focused on upsetting and sensitive topics, or unravelled into distressing encounters – both for participants and myself/assistants. Basudha was slightly more prepared than Sohini, since she had formerly volunteered with Parichiti and undertaken various other social work placements and training. For Sohini, however, ethnographic/sociological fieldwork was a largely new experience, and so there was much to consider in terms of safety and wellbeing. In both cases, I took steps to keep assistants safe during fieldwork – making sure, for instance, that family/friends knew where they were, that they carried phones (as I did), and that they never went anywhere on their own.

As noted earlier, to help prepare assistants for fieldwork (and transcription), I briefed them on the aims of the project, and on my experiences meeting and talking to domestic workers via Parichiti; I also encouraged them to be open and honest with me, and to tell me if they were at any point struggling and needed to take a break. In some cases, particularly at the start of fieldwork, and when first starting to work with Sohini, it was difficult to know if assistants were comfortable with the various aspects of fieldwork. It was thus important to check-in with assistants, and to make sure they were taking breaks from fieldwork when needed. We also helped each other during these trips, sharing snacks and drinks, and talking at length afterwards, about the difficulties we had faced and what we could do differently on the next trip. Additionally, since both Sohini and Basudha gave out their phone numbers to participants, and they on a few occasions received phone-calls from strangers asking for money, it was important to make sure they felt supported, and that they were also happy to continue doing fieldwork as we had been doing it. When transcribing, I again made sure Humaira felt comfortable raising points and issues; and, in the following analysis, I have tried to indicate as much as possible where research assistants made interventions during interviews and where difficulties regarding interpretation and

translation arose – both during fieldwork and afterwards, when translating/transcribing interviews and writing-up (Turner, 2010; Choi *et al.*, 2012).

Consent, Anonymity & Confidentiality

Because commuter participants had little or no formal education and could not, in most cases, read and write, I obtained informed consent verbally, explaining the key points of the research before asking them to take part in interviews.⁴⁷ There was, however, often little time to go into detail; and, furthermore, when I *did* try and go into detail, commuters, in many cases, interrupted me, brushing off my explanations as unimportant, or else saying ‘I have not studied’, implying that they could not understand such matters. As noted earlier, participants wanted to know about me, not my research. As is often the case in social/ethnographic research, people also sometimes ‘appeared’ and ‘disappeared’, or else ended up disclosing intimate experiences and emotions during interviews and more informal conversations which, upon reflection, they might have preferred to have kept private from others (Oakley, 1981; Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). The first and only time I met Kabita (mid-forties), for instance, was inside Madhabi’s house in July 2015, an hour or so after she had turned up on Madhabi’s doorstep. Kabita had had a fight with her family and had wanted to call her *didi*, who lived in the city; however, since her own phone had been taken from her in the fight, she had come to ask if she could use Madhabi’s. Kabita stood up as Madhabi explained all of this, showing us the cluster of bruises that was forming on her back; Madhabi then pressed her friend to tell us in her own words what had happened, and about her life generally, asking us to record what was said. Kabita agreed and so we switched the recorder on and settled ourselves on the bed, ready to listen to Kabita who, over the next twenty minutes, unfolded her story in detail as the rain lashed the paddy fields outside (see Chapter 7). Kabita had perhaps wanted to unburden herself, or had thought that we could help her – possibly because of what Madhabi may have said to her about us before we had arrived. Because of the intimate and distressing nature of what Kabita told us, we felt that we could not

⁴⁷ I typically explained, or tried to explain, that I was a student from the UK (or ‘London’, if ‘the UK’ was not recognised) and that I was writing a book about the lives of people who travel by train for domestic work; however, sometimes I explained my work in terms of studying for a degree, which was a familiar concept to some people.

interrupt Kabita as she spoke; and it was only at the end, once she had stopped speaking, that we managed to explain a little about ourselves and that we could not offer practical help, though we would, with permission, put her in touch with Parichiti. We also asked Kabita if it was okay to use her words in our work, under a different name and she agreed; however, on the way back to city we wondered if we had exploited the situation – and her distress. Throughout fieldwork, I experienced similar, though less extreme dilemmas; and, in writing this thesis, I have reflected upon everyday encounters and experiences, and on informal conversations and group discussions with workers and others – including middle-class friends and acquaintances and the host family I lived with for the first four months of my fieldwork. This similarly raises issues about consent – and the broader issue of ‘betrayal’ in ethnographic research – since I did not ‘recruit’ these individuals as ‘participants’ and thus they did not ‘consent’ to have their words and actions treated as data (see also Wadley, 1994: xxxvii; Still, 2014: 25).⁴⁸

For all of these reasons, then, I have taken steps to preserve participants’ anonymity, as well as the anonymity of others who are mentioned more indirectly in this thesis. I have changed all personal names (apart from those of assistants) and in some cases other key details; and I have referred only in general terms to the areas where participants lived. In addition, I have tried to represent participants fairly and responsibly, checking interpretations and translations with assistants and others to ensure that this is the case. Although I have also changed the names of others whom I mention more peripherally in this thesis, or I have referred to them in general terms (as ‘employers’, ‘acquaintances’ and ‘friends’), it is recognised that those who knew me in Kolkata would likely be able to identify these people, and that those whom I write about would also be able to identify themselves. I have also not changed the names of assistants, since this is what they wanted and I believe that revealing their identities does not, as in the case of participants, carry risks to their safety or

⁴⁸ I deliberated about whether and how to write about these various conversations and encounters, and I recognise that some people might be surprised to see that I *have* written about them, as well as the ways in which I have. I hope it is clear that my intention in writing this thesis has not been to cause offence and that readers will understand why I have produced the account I have. At the same time, I recognise that in writing about power and power relationships, it is, to some extent, inevitable that I will not please some people, particularly if they do not share my politics and sympathies with workers (see also Still, 2014: 25-26; Wadley, 1994: xxxvii).

reputation, though, of course, this cannot be guaranteed. As with other conversations and encounters, I have tried to describe these conversations and encounters, and to present assistants and others, as fairly as possible. Due to the nature of the research and the need for assistance with translation and transcription, I did not alone have access to raw data; Humaira, Sohini, and to a lesser extent my Bengali teachers, had access to this data at times, although only Sohini had access to the actual files. As noted already, I conducted interviews in venues that were convenient and safe for participants (and myself/assistants); and I gave participants the necessary space to articulate their experiences and feelings in their own words and time. In addition, I sought participants' permission before digitally recording interviews and conversations, and I made it clear to participants that they could stop the recording or suspend interviews at any point.

Photo-Voice Project & Use of Photos

Researchers incorporating visual methods, including photo-elicitation, into their projects have at times found them both practically and ethically problematic (Powers, 1996; Pink, 2001). Although Madhabi expressed interest in and excitement about the project when we first discussed it, and she also seemed to have no problem using the camera when we practised taking photographs together, I was aware that she might, for various reasons, later struggle to use the camera and thus fulfil my expectations for the project – something which would, in turn, place her in a tricky position. I also worried about her taking and using the camera, not because she might lose or break the camera, but because carrying around the camera, which was, as noted, digital rather than disposable, might be a burden for her – and particularly if others questioned her about where the camera had come from. Additionally, there were (again) difficulties around obtaining informed consent, from Madhabi and the people *in the photos*. Indeed, even though I had explained to Madhabi that she should ask permission before taking people's photos, and that she should also avoid taking close-up photos of people's faces, I am doubtful whether she understood or listened to these instructions since there were, in the end, many photos of people's faces – including those of family, friends, and even some of her employers. As with the project more generally, then, I have tried to preserve Madhabi's and other's anonymity by not showing here, or in the exhibitions, photos (Madhabi's or my own) where people are

clearly-identifiable. I have also not included any photos which portray sensitive moments; and, rather than including photos for decorative purposes, I have tried to reflect on these as data, contextualising them within the analysis and providing explanations (Madhabi's and my own) where appropriate.

Researching & Writing about Violence

Witnessing or knowing about harm in other people's lives can be a source of 'moral turmoil' for researchers (Liebling & Stanko, 2001: 421; Barnard, 1992; Sanders, 2005). As others have done, I had to ask myself during fieldwork whether it was in the best interests of participants to break their confidence and report instances of harm – to the police, to Parichiti – or whether it was better to advocate on workers' behalf more indirectly, through research (Young & Barrett, 2001). Since I was originally planning to do research on sex work and had read about the dilemmas faced by researchers who witness or come to know about legal and harmful activity through their research in this particular context (Barnard, 1992; Sanders, 2005), including those who had done so in India (Sariola, 2010), I was already quite sceptical about how worthwhile it would be to seek the help of the police in cases of harmful or illegal activity such as domestic violence. Moreover, as my fieldwork wore on and I built a picture of women's lives and heard their stories, I realised that when women do seek help from the police, local parties or the *gram panchayat* (village council), their pleas are often ignored or dismissed. Furthermore, from speaking to other researchers and activists, I learned that involving the police and other bodies could actually do more harm than good, leading to increased harassment and accusations of impropriety from husbands and family. For these reasons, then, I chose not to seek the help of the police in cases of known or suspected harm and instead focused on connecting women (where they were not already connected) to Parichiti, so they could, if they wished, access their services.

Writing about violence – and other topics, including poverty – similarly raises ethical concerns, not simply because of the issue of consent, but because such writing also carries the risk of becoming prurient or 'pornographic' (Still, 2014: 24-25; see also Daniel, 1996). In addition, I recognise that my discussion about what are arguably some of the most trying and 'shameful' aspects of women's lives (work, poverty,

violence) not only raises a broader question about betrayal in research, but could also potentially reinforce harmful stereotypes about poor and Dalit women and men who have historically been constructed as backward and uncivilised (Still, 2014: 25). I wish to avoid representing Dalit women as heroic sufferers and passive victims, as I similarly wish to avoid romanticising their lives. As Still highlights, 'in either romanticising or pitying Dalit women, the complexities of both Dalit women's own subjectivities and the internal gender dynamics of the community are neglected' (2014: 17). I have, for these reasons, tried to avoid reductive characterisations of commuting domestic workers by drawing out the complexities and contradictions in their lives and by allowing them to, as far as is possible, 'speak for themselves'. While the resulting accounts sometimes appear fragmented and confusing, my intention, like Still's, has been to give a sense of who my participants are as people, rather than simply as research participants and 'informants' (2014: 17).

Leaving the Field

Because human relationships lie at the heart of ethnographic research, and because I conducted fieldwork over a prolonged period, getting to know some participants relatively well, leaving the field was difficult to negotiate – for myself and perhaps key participants. Researchers note that negotiating withdrawal from the field can be tricky given that, during the course of research, participants often disclose personal information to researchers, and, in many cases, researchers become for participants 'listeners', entering into a cathartic relationship which participants then sometimes wish to extend this relationship beyond fieldwork (Reeves, 2010: 326-327; see also Ortiz, 2004). Certainly, myself and assistants became, to some extent, 'listeners' for Madhabi; and, although I believe she understood when I explained, in January 2016 and then again on what was my last visit, in mid-February 2016, that I would be leaving in March to go back to the UK and that, after this, we would not have contact, I nevertheless worried about saying goodbye to her – especially since it appeared that she had few people in her community to talk to. It was towards the end of fieldwork, moreover, that I started to think properly about how to present participants' words and stories, and how to do so honestly and fairly, whilst protecting their anonymity.

Following others, I sought to negotiate a ‘delicate and thoughtful’ withdrawal from the field (Reeves, 2010: 326-327; see also Jacobsen & Landau, 2003); however, after finding out that my grandmother was ill and in hospital, I decided to bring my departure forward, changing my flight and packing up my apartment in just two days. There was no time to arrange visits with Sohini and so, regrettably, I did not, in the end, say goodbye to Madhabi and other key participants, although Sohini called them to explain what had happened. It was difficult to leave in such circumstances – for myself and possibly also for key participants – but I believe that, because I had informed key participants earlier that I would soon be leaving, the negative effects of my hurried departure were, to some extent, mitigated. Moreover, for a time after fieldwork I kept in touch, indirectly, with Madhabi (via Sohini); and, similarly, I continue to be in contact with Parichiti, who are in turn in contact with many of my participants (including key participants) – something which has, arguably, not provided participants with any benefits, but which has nevertheless been an invaluable source of support to me.

Self-Care: Safety and Well-Being

Although I had some prior experience of conducting research in unpredictable and ‘dangerous’ contexts,⁴⁹ and I had also previously lived in India, which meant that I was able to anticipate some of the risks and dangers I encountered during fieldwork, I nevertheless had to adapt and adjust my plans as time went on, regularly discussing issues of safety with supervisors and others. When conducting fieldwork, I generally followed the same advice that I gave assistants – to let friends and family know where I was going, to carry a phone, and to not make trips anywhere on my own. In addition, I carried in my purse details of my health insurance and my emergency contacts (in Kolkata and the UK), and generally always packed a torch, bottle of water, umbrella, plasters, and painkillers. Since I had been quite unwell in India in the past, I was vigilant about my health, making sure that I stayed hydrated and took time to recover in cases of stomach upset. I also tried to protect myself as much as possible from the heat and sun, wearing a scarf on my head or carrying an umbrella. As fieldwork involved spending a lot of time on public transport, in the thick of the heat, congestion,

⁴⁹ I had previously carried out research in Rio de Janeiro’s red-light areas, an experience which afforded me exposure to insecure research sites and taught me how to follow my ‘sixth sense’ (Williams *et al.*, 1992).

and pollution, I also took regular breaks from fieldwork – to rest and recuperate, but also to meet friends and socialise, which provided a different but equally important form of respite and relief. On a few occasions, I left the city altogether, in one case (in February 2015) returning to the UK for a few weeks to see friends and family and to discuss my work with supervisors.

It was not only the practical and physical challenges of fieldwork that necessitated regular breaks; there was also the difficult nature of the research itself and the fact that interviews and conversations with workers often focused on sensitive and upsetting topics, demanding a great deal of ‘emotion work’ from myself and assistants (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]). Again, I was somewhat prepared for this since I had some experience of conducting sensitive research and working with hard-to-reach groups, and I had also spoken to others, prior to fieldwork, who had done similarly difficult research in India. However, fieldwork was unpredictable and messy, and there were occasions when myself and assistants were left feeling worried and upset by what we had seen and heard. Furthermore, although I became in some way ‘de-sensitised’ to workers’ stories of hardship and distress as fieldwork wore on, something which in itself I found worrying (see also Melrose, 2002, Campbell, 2002), there was at the same time a collective weight and pain to these stories that hit me in waves and prevented me for days and weeks at a time from being able to continue – both during fieldwork and afterwards. For these reasons, too, then, it was important to take breaks from fieldwork and to talk through these issues and feelings with others. I was fortunate to have strong support networks in Kolkata and Edinburgh and it was to these networks that I often turned during times of personal difficulty and distress. Additionally, I kept a diary during fieldwork, writing down my thoughts and feelings, which similarly helped me to cope with some of the issues outlined here.

Conclusion

This thesis offers rich qualitative data from key participants, exploring the everyday lives and experiences of domestic workers – mostly women – who commute to and from Kolkata. There is a clear lack of men’s voices, although, as noted, this reflects the changing profile of domestic workers in India and the fact that commuting domestic workers in Kolkata are overwhelmingly women. Similarly, more research is

needed on the experiences of Muslim workers and older domestic workers, although, again, it is recognised that older workers would be more likely to live in the city or to do live-in work since commuting takes a significant toll on workers' health and bodies (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, more research is needed on the role of agencies, a topic which is discussed in Chapter 4 (in relation to how workers find work) but not in detail. These caveats apart, however, I hope to have captured the lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers and contributed to the wider understanding of the work and the conditions within which it occurs.

Chapter Four: Starting Work

In this chapter, I provide some context to my study and to the lives of commuters, offering a discussion around the research question, *How and why do domestic workers start commuting for domestic work?* The analysis begins by analysing two main, but overlapping narratives which emerge from commuters' accounts in relation to commuting and work: the first is a narrative of misfortune, suffering, and patriarchal failure and relates primarily to commuters who endured (more) difficult circumstances (as widows, single mothers and so on); and the second is a more hopeful, positive narrative, centred on commuters' children and the promise of intergenerational mobility, which relates primarily to those commuters who had earning husbands and who could afford to invest, often significantly, in children's education. I then provide a more in-depth discussion about the various advantages and disadvantages of commuting – as opposed to living in the city, in informal settlements/slums, illustrating that, while for many commuting is a matter of survival and economic necessity, for others (i.e. those who are relatively better off), the decision to commute is sometimes a 'choice' – albeit one made within a very limited set of circumstances – linked to the desire to own land and property. The second half of the chapter then discusses the work itself, outlining the various kinds of work commuters do and why, the various types of working arrangement that exist within the sector, and the wages, terms, and conditions. At the end, I map the broader policy context within which domestic work in India takes place, outlining key developments with respect to law and policy, and, afterwards discussing the various successes and limitations of domestic worker organising and activism in India and West Bengal/Kolkata.

Taking up Domestic Work

Suffering (koshto)

Women who commute for domestic work are often destitute women – widows, those abandoned by husbands, those who have fled violence – who take up domestic work for their survival, and for the survival of their families. Like other types of domestic worker (live-in workers, city-dwelling live-out workers), they are often long-term victims of economic decline, migrants from impoverished rural areas and, frequently,

the sole/primary earners in their families. They generally articulate their lives and work in terms of patriarchal failure, misfortune, and suffering, the latter typically being expressed through the Bengali concept of *koshto* (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 119-144). Indeed, in these women's accounts, women's 'proper place' is in the home and it is invariably the failure/inability of men (husbands, fathers, sons) to provide for women and their families that is the cause of women's paid work and thus the cause of women's suffering (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 119-144). Such ideas about women's 'proper place' and women's 'honour' have, as noted earlier, traditionally been associated with middle-class and upper-caste women in India; however, recent research demonstrates that poor, working-class and Dalit women similarly negotiate ideas about 'honour' in day-to-day life (Grover, 2011; Still, 2014; Gorringer, 2016). These ideas are often reflected in women's longing for an 'idealized, patriarchal fantasy' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 144) where women remain in the private space of the home to be looked after by fathers, husbands and sons.

Madhabi was, as noted in Chapter 3, one of the more outspoken and assertive women I met and knew during fieldwork. She was among those to instigate lively dancing at the Parichiti picnic in January 2015, where we first met; and, afterwards, when she became a key participant in my research, she appeared to relish the attention our visits would bring, talking loudly and unselfconsciously as we walked together from the station to her home, or running up to us on the platform at Dhakuria and pulling on our cheeks. Madhabi had, as I came to learn, lived a particularly hard life and was something of an 'outsider' in her community – circumstances which perhaps help to explain her relative lack of inhibition and the fact that she became one of my key participants. Sitting together on her bed the first time Basudha and I visited her at home, she explained that she had lived 'alone' (*ekla thakchi*) for many years, although by 'alone' she meant that she had lived without her husband, Somnath – she actually lived with her two grown sons and elderly mother.

I have a husband and two sons but he got married to another woman who has seven children. She's an old hag (*burī dainī*). My *didi* took me with her and showed me Kolkata, now I work in Kolkata doing *thike kaaj*. He [husband] doesn't look after me. He doesn't look after us at all. What can I do? (*ki korbo?*) Whatever he wanted, he did. What I have written on my forehead, I'm doing (*kopale ja, lekha ache*).⁵⁰ I'm working hard for my food,

⁵⁰ This is a commonly-used Bengali phrase, which alludes to misfortune and 'fate'.

and to look after my sons and my mother who is sick now (Madhabi, 13.05.2015).

Women are not always abandoned by men; sometimes they leave themselves, often because of men's violence and abuse. Kabita, for instance, fled her husband, leaving her sons behind and taking up *khawa-pora kaaj* in Kolkata, after suffering regular beatings from her husband; and she again faced violence – from her husband *and* her sons – when she returned five years later, being punished, she believed, for having left and worked in Kolkata. 'My entire life has been full of suffering' (Kabita, 09.07.2015). Anjali (41), too, suffered years of torture at the hands of her husband before fleeing with her three young daughters to the village near Sonarpur where we met.⁵¹ Sitting inside her cramped, rented home, Anjali explained in hushed tones that she had had no choice *but to* leave her husband, who continued to live in the Sundarbans. 'He drank a lot and caused me a lot of pain and suffering (*o anek modh kheyee amai khub betha r koshto diyeche*)' (22.04.2015). With the help of a friend, Anjali had found a house to rent and a job in the city. She had done all kinds of work over the years – mostly cooking and cleaning work – but when I knew her, she worked in just two houses as a cook, bringing home a total of Rs.3,200 each month.⁵²

Most of Anjali's money went towards basic living costs – rent, fuel, food for her and her youngest daughter, Gita (twelve); her other two daughters had married and moved away. However, after being diagnosed with breast cancer several years earlier, she had also had to pay for various medicines and treatments. Anjali pulled down her nightdress to show me her scar, explaining that she was still recovering from her last operation. She took paracetamol for the pain, as well as a 'supplement', which had been recommended to her by a friend: 'I've been taking this for two years. I've been spending so much, but if I don't have it, I feel weak. I can't go to work, I can't cut vegetables, I can't make bread' (22.04.2015). On top of these various expenses, Anjali planned to get her youngest daughter married, something which would, she estimated, cost around one lakh rupees (£1,000). As we shall see in the next chapter,

⁵¹ The last time I tried to visit Anjali at home, I was told by her neighbours that she had moved. They said that she had left with her daughter a few weeks earlier, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the field to the other side of the house. I could not call Anjali as she did not have a mobile phone but it seems likely that she had been evicted; she had in fact told me earlier that she was worried about the house not being 'her own'.

⁵² At the time of my fieldwork Rs.100 was roughly equivalent to £1.

Anjali was particularly worried about the future and the very likely possibility of her body giving out altogether, but she knew that she had to keep going – for her own and her daughter's sake.

Have you ever seen such a woman with so many problems who can work like I do? I have to do it. Who else will do it? [...] I'm living for my daughter. Otherwise I wouldn't want to live anymore. If I don't have this [supplement], I wouldn't be able to bear any more. Sometimes I cry on the way to work, thinking "How will I manage? How will my daughter manage?" (Anjali, 22.04.2015).

Many commuters begin doing domestic work when they are children, the decision to send a daughter for domestic work often precipitated by the death, injury, or illness of a father, or so that younger siblings can continue to study (see also Parichiti, 2015: 53-69). At the age of eight, after her father fell ill with tuberculosis, Chitra (45) had been sent to do *khawa-pora kaaj* in Kolkata.

We were very poor and my father was ill. My mother didn't leave the house so my brother asked me to do this work. My brother was going to school then but me and my sisters didn't. I wanted to go to school but went to work instead. My wage was Rs.20 and I wanted to save it for my marriage. I worked there [north Kolkata] for three or four years and then came back home. After a short time with my family, I went to work again in Tollygunge [...] I used to have to get up very early to get the *tiffins*⁵³ ready, and I would have to stay awake until they all went to bed at 10, 11 at night. I could only sleep after everyone else went to sleep and I would have to make sure they had all eaten before I slept. I learned things the hard way. I would get beaten for not being able to light the stove (*unon*) properly (Chitra, 12.07.2015).

Malika (45) had similarly never been able to study, insinuating that her father had been incapable of looking after her and her family: 'I have been working since my childhood. I have been suffering since my childhood. [...] The person who has a father like mine, can she think of going to school?' (19.07.2015).

West Bengal has a particularly poor record on child labour and a worryingly high number of girl children (5-14 years) work in domestic service, something which appears to be linked to the state's high proportion of out-of-school children – girls in particular – and state-level education policies that underlie these high dropout rates (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2008: 98; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 36). The demand for

⁵³ The word '*tiffin*' refers to either a snack or light meal which is typically carried to work or school.

girl child workers is also likely connected to the fact that young girls are generally paid a pittance and they also consume less (in terms of food and clothing and so on) than adult live-in workers; additionally, young girls are often perceived as docile and obedient, and thus more reliable and less of a security-risk than adults (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2008: 99; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 37). Most of those who I knew who had started working as children, did so until the time of their marriage; they would then usually stop working for a few years, to raise children and tend to their families, before returning to work part-time. The experience of having worked as children is, as we shall see in Chapter 8, why workers vehemently reject the idea of their daughters and granddaughters following in their footsteps by taking up domestic work. When speaking of her granddaughter, who could often be seen toddling about outside her house, Malika said: 'We wish for her to study and grow up. We won't send her for such work [...] We pray that at least she won't go into this work' (19.07.2015).

The narrative of patriarchal failure articulated by commuters is often cyclical, women's fathers, husbands and sons repeatedly failing or being unable to take on the prescribed responsibility of looking after their families (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 127). Travelling with Ruksana and her friend Fatema to Naihati, Ruksana (late thirties) explained that she had been married young, shortly after her parents had died, to a man who was similarly unable to take care of her and who had later died of drug and alcohol related illness, leaving Ruksana to raise their four young children alone. 'It was very difficult, they [children] were very young. Eventually, someone helped me and I found a job. I started earning money so I could look after my children [...] I never knew that such misfortune would be in store for me' (Ruksana, 26.07.2015). Often, women are forced to work even when men *are* around, since men's work is frequently irregular and yields low/unstable incomes. Mithu, for instance, had taken up work as an *ayah* when her husband, Biswanath, had lost his job in a factory; and she had *continued* working even after he had found work since, working as a *rickshaw-wallah*, he only earned a meagre amount. Fatema (50), too, explained that the reason she and other women in her neighbourhood (Naihati) had started working in the city was because the factories – which had previously employed many men – had closed: 'The jute mills closed, so everyone started coming to work in Kolkata. We get money and can look after our families' (Fatema, 26.07.2015).

It is often in these cases – where men are around but unwilling or unable to provide for their wives and families – that women are most resentful of having to take on the role of breadwinner, indeed sometimes stating or otherwise insinuating that their husbands are ‘useless’ (see also Roy, 2003: 192-194). Charu, for instance, explained that she worked in four houses every day, despite her ailing health and the difficulty of her long commute, while her husband, Prakash, did little to support the family: ‘I had to get my daughter married and now I have a lot of debt to pay. My husband doesn’t earn enough – he’s just sitting at home. My sons also have a low income. They’ve asked me to stay home and not work, but I have debts. I must go’ (Charu, 16.05.2015). There was a tone of bitterness in Charu’s voice as she made this comment, and, indeed, Charu’s daughter-in-law – who was sitting next to Charu on the bed – quickly sprang to Prakash’s defence, adding that he was actually unwell, having suffered an injury at work several years earlier.⁵⁴ Prakash himself later confirmed this story, mumbling something about a *gari* (motorised cart or small vehicle) and his hand and emptying out a small paper bag containing what he explained was his pain and blood pressure medication. I had initially read this encounter – and Prakash’s decision to show me his medication – as a reflection of Prakash’s embarrassment and shame (only), overlooking other possible explanations including that showing me his tablets could have been Prakash’s way of indirectly asking for money. I had also initially neglected to consider the role my own feelings of discomfort had played in this encounter and my subsequent reading of it; looking back, I remembered how embarrassed I had felt when Prakash had joined the conversation and how I had felt more embarrassed still when he had emptied out his bag of tablets. Although it is difficult to know how Prakash felt speaking to us about his wife’s work, and whether and to what extent my interpretation of this encounter was coloured by my own feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, it is likely given the dominant gender ideology outlined earlier and indeed other men’s comments about their feelings of shame in relation to women’s work, that Prakash did feel, at least to some extent, embarrassed and ashamed – and thus that he had to defend himself and prove his incapacity to work.

⁵⁴ Injuries, as Grover notes, are unfortunately common for men doing manual labour; and years of poor nutrition and alcohol consumption can also increase risk of injury while at the same time adversely affecting men’s health in the longer term (2011: 44).

While some of my participants' husbands did work – as van drivers and personal/private drivers – many did not work, or had irregular employment, as auto-drivers, *rickshaw-wallahs*, painters and decorators, carpenters, or as seasonal agricultural workers and daily labourers (see also Parichiti, 2015: 15-18). The extent to which men lacked regular, secure employment was evident during afternoon visits to villages when groups of men could be seen standing about chatting or sat on woven matts playing cards; visiting tea shops on the way to commuters' homes, we also often saw groups of men sitting and drinking tea while the women around us rushed about, jumping on and off trains. Middle-class acquaintances in the city would also frequently comment on working-class men's 'worklessness' when talking about the husbands of their 'maids', sometimes representing these men as irresponsible and incapable while at other times offering more sympathetic, nuanced analyses: 'They don't work, they drink. Alcoholism is rife. You know life is very difficult for them too. But women suffer more, they suffer a lot of violence and have to do everything' (field notes, 26.06.2015).

Men's un/underemployment lies, as scholars note, primarily in a lack of access to the means of production, originating in landlessness or near landlessness and consequent rural out-migration (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 127; see also Roy, 2003: 89-94). Indeed, while demand for women's labour in low-paid, 'feminised' occupations such as domestic work increased throughout the latter part of the twentieth century in West Bengal, traditional employment opportunities for men declined rapidly after the 1960s following a national recession, widespread political instability, and the withdrawal of industry and investment (Roy, 2003: 89; see also Khanna, 1989). Furthermore, in the southern district of South 24 Parganas, where most of the commuters I knew resided, poor irrigation and single-cropping have also contributed to a lack of agricultural employment opportunities for men, further fuelling flows of poverty-driven out-migration from rural areas – particularly the Sundarbans – and leading to a significant number of women-headed households (Roy, 2003: 56, 89-94). Moreover, as domestic work has become feminised, women being pushed into this work in part because of men's un/underemployment, it has become increasingly 'deskilled' and demeaning work for men who, as noted earlier, once made up the greater portion of Kolkata/India's domestic workers (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 136-142). Mansoor was arguably something of an exception in that he appeared to regard his

work (which ranged from running errands to cleaning and working in the family shop) *as work*, and, moreover, he expressed a certain satisfaction in cleaning work which, as we shall see, is generally the least preferred type of work.

Lauren: What kind of work do you do?

Mansoor: Whatever work I do, I work from my heart (*mon theke kori*). I do all kinds of work, washing up, cleaning the toilets. The way I am at home, the work I do there – I'm like that here. I also work here [in the family shop].

Lauren: What does a typical day look like for you?

Mansoor: In the morning, I go to the bazar for shopping. I check whatever is there, in the fridge, before I go. Then I move on to other work. For example, if there's something which needs cleaning, I'll clean it. I do dusting...

Lauren: Which jobs do you prefer doing?

Mansoor: I like work which involves cleaning things. I like that the most, cleaning something which isn't clean.

Lauren: Why that work?

Mansoor: Actually, there's no work I dislike. I like to keep everything clean. I do chores that other people' can't do too, like cleaning the floors and the ceiling fans. I do it by climbing up a ladder. First I clean it with a piece of cloth and then soap water, then again I use a piece of cloth.

Sohini: Is there any work which you don't like, or like as much?

Mansoor: No, there's no such work (05.10.2015).⁵⁵

For many, if not most men, rendering personalised service appears to be perceived and experienced as deeply humiliating; and, indeed even those with more respectable, better-paid jobs like driving⁵⁶ often express a sense of bitterness and frustration at being trapped in these kinds of work, seeking better and more respectable (*bhodrosto*) jobs for themselves and children (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 138).

Men's un/underemployment is, as indicated above, also linked to men's drinking and violence against women. Liquor shops (*moder dokan*) are ubiquitous in Kolkata and rural West Bengal and it is not uncommon to see groups of (mostly poor, working-class) men crowded about in front of the barred-windows of such establishments. Commuters also spoke about the widespread nature of men's drinking in their

⁵⁵ Although I met Mansoor through my friend (his employer) and this likely had a bearing on Mansoor's comments and responses, he did seem to have a very good relationship with his employer, explaining that his 'Madam' (my friend's mother) was better than his own mother and how it gave him 'goose bumps' to think about how much she and her children loved him.

⁵⁶ Although driving is accorded a higher status than other types of domestic work – because of the perception that driving requires a greater level of skill and it involves work outside the home – it is still not considered desirable employment (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 138).

communities; Anjali and Ruksana had, as noted, been married to men who drank heavily, and Ruksana explained that her husband had died because of his drinking and use of drugs. There have, moreover, been calls for West Bengal to follow in the footsteps of Gujarat, Nagaland, and Bihar by banning or partially banning the sale of alcohol, with campaigners claiming that alcohol consumption is responsible for men's violence against women (*First Post*, 2016). Clearly, there are complicated reasons as to why men drink, and scholars have attempted to contextualise men's drinking within a wider discussion about the subjectivities and working lives of men, highlighting interlinking factors, such as personal crises and low levels of self-esteem, as well as an increased sense of vulnerability when men are out of work (Jasinski *et al.*, 1997; Jackson, 1999, 2001; Osella & Osella, 2000; Chant, 2001); however, as research highlights, and as we shall see in Chapter 7, men's drinking has a disproportionate effect on women (Chopra, 2003; Jeyaseelan *et al.*, 2007; Sariola, 2010; Grover, 2011).

Children & Intergenerational Mobility

Not all commuters explain their work in terms of patriarchal failure, misfortune, and suffering. Another equally significant narrative which emerges from commuters' accounts, and which often co-exists with the narrative of suffering, is about children and intergenerational upward social mobility. Women articulating their work and lives in such terms are typically younger and/or in better health than those associated with the more negative narrative discussed above; they also tend to have more financial security due to the fact that their husbands are also working. They usually have one or two children, and by working part-time they are able to (help) pay for children's education – schooling, tuition, extra-curricular activities – which, they believe, will be their children's ticket out of domestic/manual labour. Like other women, they too sometimes start working as children, or else are married early; and they also typically take a break for marriage and childbearing, again taking up domestic work once children are in school. However, they tend not to explain their work in terms of economic necessity, but rather as something which is undertaken *for* their children and their children's education. The investment in children's education and futures offsets, to some extent, the stigma that is attached to paid work; as we shall see in Chapter 8, women commuters often reconfigure their paid work as an extension of

their traditional mothering role, emphasising how, through working in the city, they are able to provide materially for their children (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 167). In many cases, these women undertake *ayah*/care work for agencies, often working night shifts so they can take care of their children during the day, or else they juggle several cooking/cleaning jobs, rushing through and between these jobs so that they can take children to school. Such arrangements are, as we shall see, difficult to manage, especially when combined with long commutes and transport delays; however, women make these sacrifices, hopeful that their children's lives turn out better than their own. In short, these women can look beyond day-to-day needs and priorities, investing in what they hope will be a different and better future for their children.

Shobna (early thirties) was one of several women to explain her work in terms of supporting her children and paying for their education. Shobna had been married young, following her father's death and pressure from extended family to undertake a hurried ceremony at Kalighat temple;⁵⁷ however, these circumstances had not prevented her marriage from turning out well. Shobna described her husband as 'very good', explaining that he worked hard (driving a van for a glass factory) to run the household, while she worked to pay for her son's education. Shobna's husband had not wanted or asked Shobna to start working; rather she had taken the initiative, explaining to her husband that it made sense for them both to work since their son, Bijoy, was growing up and asking for 'things'.

When my son was born, my husband ran the house, I didn't work. He never asked me to but I found out that alone he couldn't manage so as my son grew a bit older and started to need more things. I thought, "He cannot always ask his father. I should also work." I thought that if I could save some money, it would help us – since our son was growing up [...] He started to grow and ask for things. That's when I started to work (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

⁵⁷ Although Shobna described the way in which she was married as 'unusual', Sen and Sengupta reveal that 'Kalighat marriages' and 'love marriages' (that is, marriages which are not arranged by parents) are not uncommon in contemporary Kolkata (2016: 185-186). Indeed, working-class parents often adopt a pragmatic approach towards marriage and sexuality and are sometimes happy to see their children elope since 'an elopement may save the parents from the worry of getting together a dowry and a big wedding' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 209).

Although Shobna had struggled to care for Bijoy in the first few years of his life, she and her husband nevertheless appeared to enjoy a degree of contentedness in their marriage that centred on raising and providing for their son. During one particularly memorable visit to Shobna's home, she in fact pulled out a series of photographs from a recent family trip to Digha (a popular seaside resort in West Bengal), explaining through laughter how Bijoy (seven) had insisted on posing beside a large boulder on the beach while her husband snapped photo after photo.

Madhumita (34), too, explained her work in terms of her children, two daughters aged nine and twelve, and, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, she spent much of her waking hours running around after and tending to these girls. Madhumita was one of the more confident and outgoing of the women I knew. She had spent part of her childhood in Kolkata and later had undertaken a love marriage. She was also keen to present an image of herself that was 'modern' and 'cosmopolitan', commenting on how, unlike most of her neighbours, she wore salwar kameez: 'See the culture in my village is to wear saris but I wear salwar kameez and go for work. So I become like a city person' (02.06.2015). Nevertheless, Madhumita was, like Shobna, keen to stress that her earnings were supplementary to those of her husband and earmarked for her daughters' education: 'My husband runs the family and I pay for the education expense. This is how we go about it' (02.06.2015). Like Shobna, Madhumita also had had to persuade her husband to allow her to start working, which she believed would help to give their daughters a better life.

There was a time when he disliked it. At that time, she [her daughter] was two years old and needed many things. I thought, "I have to start working. This house is being bought entirely by us, it's not from our in-laws. We are four and if we both do not work then we cannot manage." Not only here, even people who have some 'standard' they are also realising that both the husband and the wife have to work to make their lives better. This has become common everywhere. What work do I have other than sitting and making them study? If by contributing Rs.2,000 to my husband I can help him. Also I can meet my own needs for a blouse or anything without asking him, or pestering him for our daily needs of shampoo or anything else. We have so many needs, especially kids. If I always ask the man to get this and that, it will create a 'pressure' on him. So I look after the needs of my kids and he runs the household (Madhumita, 02.06.2015).

Of course, women's insistence that they are only working to provide a 'supplementary' income is in part a reflection of the dominant gender ideology outlined at the beginning

of this chapter, as well as indicative of a more general pattern whereby women undervalue their economic contribution to the household (on the latter, see: Mies, 1982; Sen & Grown, 1987; Ozyegin 2001).⁵⁸ The fact that Madhumita had to persuade her husband to allow her to take up domestic work illustrates the strength of this ideology and the associated stigma attached to women's work. Madhumita had told her husband that without an additional income, they would have struggled to have made ends meet and, as her account indicates, she also likely emphasised her daughters' needs, telling her husband that by working she could help to relieve some of the 'pressure', by paying for their daughters' education which would still be in keeping with her responsibilities as a mother. In addition, she perhaps pointed out – as she does in her account – that in many middle-class homes, the wife and husband both often go out to work.

These commuters, who were often mothers of young children, sometimes expressed a 'preference' for domestic work, in some cases moving into domestic work from other types of informal employment (tailoring work, shop work, making and selling small items and snacks), which did not offer the same advantages – the opportunity to earn a (relatively) stable income and the flexibility to negotiate reproductive responsibilities. Madhumita explained that when her children had been young, a friend had told her about a job in a school, but she had not been able to take it up because it had entailed long hours. 'The duty hours were from 7am-5pm and I had to maintain my family. My younger daughter was also two years old. Where will I keep this young kid and go for the work?' (02.06.2015). Madhumita had, for a short time, used a crèche in the city but as she was unable to keep her daughters there for more than few hours at a time, she faced the same problem; there was also nobody else in the family to help provide care for her daughters.

If there was someone who could stay behind then I could go for full time work [...] I had to maintain my daughter, my husband, the house, my younger daughter.... For them, my time goes. When she (elder daughter) returns home, I call her. Even though I stay at my work, I never forget and remember that my daughter is returning home now. If there is any need, I come over. So getting bounded by a fixed duty work was not possible for me. I feel the work I do now is fine. A woman here is earning Rs.6,000 for working for 12 hours and I get Rs.6,500 rupees for working from 7am-1pm, so I

⁵⁸ Although it was difficult to know how women's earnings were spent, and thus how important women's earnings were to the survival of the family, it is likely that in some of the cases where women described their earnings as supplementary, they were in fact more important – i.e. helping to pay for food and so on.

don't need to work for 12 hours. I can give that time to my kids, husband and family. If I worked in another place, then I wouldn't be able to attend school meetings. They might allow for one day not regularly (02.06.2015).

The desire for flexibility also combines with the need for a regular income, which is, as we have seen, important given the insecurity of men's incomes and work. Indeed, although there is high turnover in domestic work, and commuters especially are at risk of being dismissed/replaced, there is at least *some* continuity compared with many men's jobs. Because there is also increasing demand for domestic workers in Kolkata, women who are dismissed/replaced are also generally able to find new jobs easily, although older workers, Muslim workers, and those with health concerns arguably have fewer options.

Additionally, although paid domestic work is stigmatised due to its associations with personalised service and low caste/class status, as well as because of ideas of domestic femininity – which maintain that women should perform domestic/care labour within their own homes for 'love', rather than in the homes of others for pay – it is, at the same time, considered respectable work for poor, working-class women (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 166-168). Taking place within the 'respectable' middle-class home, under the supervision of the 'respectable' middle-class *boudi*, domestic work is perceived as better and safer than other informal work, such as construction work or work in shops and tea houses (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 168). Domestic work is also not stigmatised to the same extent in Kolkata/West Bengal that it is in other parts of India (Still, 2014); when I asked commuters if they attempted to conceal the nature of their work from extended family, they often shook their heads, telling me there was 'no problem'.⁵⁹ Having said this, domestic work is not in any way desirable work, and regardless of commuters' personal circumstances and age, they reject this for their daughters, just as other domestic workers do and just as they also reject a future of low-paying manual labour for their sons. Ultimately, it is the 'sense of deep discontent with the rendering of personal service, of being trapped in low-paying, low-status, and manual jobs' that explains commuters' (and other domestic workers') aspirations for

⁵⁹ The weakening stigma around paid domestic work is likely connected to the weakening caste association and the sheer number of women doing this work.

their children and their often-tremendous investment in children's education (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 224).

Why Commute?

Many commuters are migrants, the majority being from southerly, rural areas of South 24 Parganas, but also in some cases from outside West Bengal/India. Women in many cases move to commuter villages and peri-urban areas as children, sometimes before being sent for *khawa-pora kaaj* in Kolkata. They also move as adults, after marriage, with their husbands and families or on their own/with children, the prospect of gaining employment in domestic work in the city serving as an important 'pull' factor (Sen & Sengupta: 2016: 72-96). Women also move *out of* the city. Namita (mid-thirties), for instance, had been born in Dhakuria, in south Kolkata, but had moved with her family to Sonarpur when the land, which was government-owned, was reclaimed by the government to build a bridge.⁶⁰ Others choose to leave the city, the aspiration to own land and property, and to give their children a better quality of life often driving their migration.⁶¹ Women resent having to travel to get to work but are aware that in the city their only real option would be to stay in informal settlements, which are overcrowded, insecure, lacking in amenities, and often unsafe for children (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 62-71). These women are, again, typically those who are better-off and who have husbands who are earning and contributing to the household; single women cannot generally hope of owning land/property and they tend to live in rented houses, in many cases shifting from one place to another. Both Purnima (43) and Chandra (48) had been born in southern South 24 Parganas and had lived for a time in the city before moving with their husbands to villages where they could afford to buy land; the fact that Purnima's in-laws had been renting in the city and later moved back to their village in South 24 Parganas is indicative of the fact that it is not possible for poor rural migrants to own land in city. Madhumita, too, had similarly moved from the city with her husband so that they could buy land. Madhumita had

⁶⁰ Domestic workers living in informal settlements in Kolkata, as Sen and Sengupta note, live in constant fear of eviction since periodic attempts to 'clean up' the city frequently result in slum demolition (2016: 66-70).

⁶¹ 142 of the 154 commuters surveyed by Parichiti reported owning houses (own, husband's, father's, or father-in-law's) and/or land and 11 women reported that they themselves owned a house or land (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93).

enjoyed living in the city as a child and indeed took pride in teaching her daughters the 'ways of the city'; however, she at the same time felt safer living and raising daughters in a village. 'It's very safe here, it's safe from every angle. Even if your things are lying outside your house, no one will steal them [...] My daughter sometimes stays alone in the house. I've never felt worried because of that. There is no such problem' (02.06.2015).

Chitra and her husband had likewise moved out of the city – primarily because they had wanted a safe(r) place to raise their children.

We stayed in Govindapur, near the rail line. The houses were very small, like chicken coops and it was very difficult to live there. We had to get water from the lake. We didn't have any electricity and during the summer it was very difficult for my children. My husband worked as a lorry driver and my children were small. I couldn't leave them with anyone so I had to lock them in from the outside. They would cry and ask me not to go, but what could I do? If we didn't get the money, how would we have eaten? I worked in Monoharpukur, Lake Garden, in two shifts. I would work the first half, then come back home, give them a wash, eat something and go back again. I worried about them being bitten by snakes or insects, or if they'd got out of the house and reached the tracks. I was scared that they would go out and play with the other kids and get onto the railway tracks. No matter how much I scolded them, they wouldn't listen, they wanted to go out. Sometimes I put them in a local crèche, near the lake, government-run, but it was difficult to drop them off and pick them up so we decided to get a place in Garia. It was better there, there was space for the children to play and I found work nearby (Chitra, 12.07.2015).

Although there is variation between urban informal settlements/slums, the conditions are, as Chitra's account illustrates, generally extremely poor – indeed a lot poorer than those in many commuter villages and peri-urban areas. There is very little space and there is frequently a lack of (clean) running water, electricity, and sewage facilities (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 62-71). Settlements which are located close to railway tracks also pose dangers for young children; Chitra's greatest fear was, as she mentioned, that her children would escape from the house and get onto tracks. Housing in these settlements is also incredibly insecure: even if women manage to buy huts or land in these settlements, there is often no legal deed to accompany them and thus the concept of 'ownership' is fuzzy (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 65). Furthermore, the settlements themselves are often deemed illegal, their continued existence depending on political patronage and government policies (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 65-66).

Conditions in commuter villages are also often poor and the housing sometimes similarly insecure. (Rented) houses are often dilapidated or constructed partially of mud (see Figure 4), which means that they are frequently damaged during heavy rain. There are also often frequent power cuts, or sometimes no electricity at all; and clean, drinking water is sometimes hard to find – particularly in the rainy season when tube wells flood and become contaminated. Furthermore, many commuters also worry about eviction, their homes similarly being dependent, in some cases, on political patronage.⁶² Having said this, commuter villages and peri-urban areas offer certain positives, and are, furthermore, often still better places to live than urban informal settlements – particularly if commuters are able to gather the money together buy land and build *pucca*, brick houses (see Figure 5). Chitra and her husband had in fact done this, moving from Garia to a village near Sonarpur where they subsequently bought land and built a house. Chitra and her husband had to borrow money from Chitra's employers and local moneylenders; but, in the end, their house stood as one of the best in their village, secure and spacious and often serving as a meeting point for Parichiti meetings. Chitra had to juggle five different jobs to pay back the money she had borrowed from employers but was nevertheless proud of what she had achieved: 'I've worked very hard to do all of this. I've been headstrong, which is why it's happened' (Chitra, 12.07.2015).



Figure 4. Inside a commuter's home. Photo by Madhabi, 2015 (reproduced with permission).

⁶² Madhabi explained that her home had been given to her and her husband by a (political) 'party' and that she feared it could be reclaimed at any point (something which may, as indicated earlier, have happened to Anjali).



Figure 5. A commuter's house near to Sonarpur. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.

Other commuters, too, seemed to enjoy a better quality of housing and life than they perhaps otherwise would have living in the city. Priya (35), for instance, spoke excitedly about her plans to renovate her house after she and her husband had decided to move in with Priya's parents (to help look after them but also to save money). 'After two months, we'll settle over there. Then we'll repair this house. This is my own place but I might rent it out, or we might just sleep here sometimes. If it's empty, I can also use it for [Parichiti] meetings' (Priya, 18.01.2016). Priya also explained how Parichiti had helped the women in their village campaign for an electricity supply, which had completely transformed their lives. I could see for myself during visits how being able to switch on lights or fans in hot summer months made life much easier for women and their families, as well as how, in many better-off homes households, electricity had also provided opportunities for new kinds of leisure, the television, in particular, being an important feature of many commuters' home lives.

While not wanting to romanticise rural life, commuter villages and peri-urban areas are arguably healthier and more peaceful places to live than the city. Children can, as Chitra noted, run around and play, the risks to their safety in many ways being lesser than those in urban settlements (see Figure 6). Additionally, although there are very few toilets, and clean, running water is not always conveniently located or easy to find (especially in the rainy season), there are more alternatives for toilet and bathing needs – including defecating in open fields and bathing in ponds. Visiting Madhabi in the afternoon, I would often find her washing her sari in the water behind her house, her hair loose and hanging to her waist. It is, again, important not to idealise this since

the water Madhabi and others used to wash clothes and bathe was stagnant, and going to the toilet in the open also entails problems for sanitation as well as safety risks for women and girls (Anand, 2014); however, these options remain better than those available for many city-dwelling domestic workers who are forced to live, bathe, and go to the toilet in much less sanitary and less private conditions.



Figure 6. Children playing football in a commuter village near to Sonarpur. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.

Having said all of this, and as both commuting and city-dwelling workers frequently point out, commuting brings serious costs, in terms of time, energy, and money; and it also becomes increasingly difficult with age (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 94). For those with non-earning husbands or in more difficult circumstances, commuting to and from the city each day is not in any way a matter of ‘choice’ or ‘preference’ but rather one of survival.

We are very poor so we must go to the city for money. At times we feel that we don’t want to go. There are so many women doing this and we have to take so many different types of transport. But then again I think if I didn’t go, what would we do? How would we eat? [...] Why do we go? Because the money is in the city and here there is no work. So many women are going for work. The crowd is much bigger than before (Madhabi, 20.05.2015).

For these women, as Madhabi explains, the reason for commuting is simple: because there is no work available in the communities where they live (or in those they have migrated from) and because this is the best option they have in terms of being able to earn a living and support their families. They do it, as Madhabi put it on another occasion, ‘for the stomach’ (*peth’er jonno*).

Types of Work

Domestic work in Kolkata is extremely heterogeneous and thus difficult to categorise. That said, commuters can be understood as a subsection of the growing ranks of live-out/part-time domestic workers, who are themselves one of four categories of domestic worker in the city.⁶³ They are typically women, and they typically juggle several different jobs, working for multiple employers daily, seven days a week. They often do cooking work (*rannar kaaj*) and/or cleaning work (*thike kaaj*, *barite kaaj*, *barir kaaj*), spending short periods – typically less than two hours – in each employer’s home each day (Parichiti, 2015: 28). There are also commuters who work as carers and *ayahs*, however, and they typically work in longer shifts (eight, ten or twelve hours) for single employers at a time. Care workers, in many cases, work for agencies and they do either day or night ‘duty’, looking after children, the elderly, or ill ‘patients’ in their homes. It is important to note that, although commuters and city-dwelling live-out workers are often characterised by employers and others as ‘part-timers’, many actually work a full, eight-hour-plus day, and that is without taking into account their commutes and unpaid work at home (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 98).

Commuters, like other live-out/part-time workers, often specialise in certain kinds of work (care work, cooking work, cleaning work), although, in many cases, jobs involve a degree of overlap. Namita (mid-thirties) was primarily employed to cook by her employers, but in one apartment she was also responsible for feeding her employer’s son breakfast and making sure he reached the school bus on time. Anjali’s work too involved an element of caring, although she was technically employed to cook; she explained how, in one of her employers’ homes, she cooked for, and in a way looked after, an elderly woman whom she called *mashi-ma*.⁶⁴ In some cases, commuters do one kind of work in one house, and another kind of work in another or several different houses; they also often move in and out of different forms of domestic work over the course of their lives, in many cases doing care work when they are young (twenties,

⁶³ The other three categories are: the full-time worker (works a longer day, around eight hours, often in one household, but does not live with employers), the live-in worker (works and lives in the employer’s home, working around the clock), and the family retainer (works for an employer for many years, often living with this employer) (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 99).

⁶⁴ The term ‘*mashi-ma*’ combines ‘*mashi*’ (meaning ‘mother’s sister’) and ‘*ma*’ (meaning ‘mother’) and is used to both signify a fictive bond and express affection and respect towards elderly women.

thirties) and then moving into cooking and/or cleaning work when they are older (forties, fifties). It is increasingly rare to find cases where commuters spend long periods in a single house each day, doing different kinds of work, although, as we shall see later, this is the type of arrangement commuters often hope to find.

The type of work a commuter does is generally dependent on their age, health, and situation, and commuters also seek different arrangements and different types of work at different points in their life. Young mothers typically desire flexibility to perform reproductive responsibilities, but they also often want to earn as much money as possible – to pay for children’s education – in many cases, opting for care work through agencies if they can manage childcare with husbands/family. Given her serious health concerns, Anjali worked as a cook and following advice from her doctor avoided more strenuous forms of work. Indeed, when Anjali *had* undertaken such work, on days when the *thiker meye*⁶⁵ had not shown up, she had suffered terribly.

If I do *thike kaaj*, I feel pain, my side swells up [...] I can’t do dusting or childcare or cleaning floors. If I fall when I dust... If I need to go up and down stairs a lot, it will be dangerous for me. I can’t keep travelling from one room to another. With *rannar kaaj*, I just go to the kitchen, cook, and then come home again. *Rannar kaaj* is my work (Anjali, 22.04.2015).

Washing floors and clothes is heavy, hard work; in many cases domestic workers perform this work using traditional methods, washing clothes by hand and cleaning floors on their hands and knees with pieces of cloth and buckets of water. Moreover, whereas cooking has a connotation of relative skill, *thike kaaj* is viewed as unskilled, menial work, hence why employers who can only afford to employ one domestic worker often choose to employ someone to wash dishes, which, aside from bathroom-cleaning, is considered the *most* menial and lowly of household tasks (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 153). It is also because of the perception of relative skill that cooking is generally better-paid than *thike kaaj* – something which is discussed in more detail below and which again makes this work more desirable to commuters and other live-out workers.

The appeal of care work is largely due to the fact it enables women to work longer hours and earn more money; however, there is also increasing demand for care workers, linked to demographic changes and changes in urban family structures,

⁶⁵ The word ‘*me ye*’ refers to a girl or woman and so ‘*thiker me ye*’ refers to a girl/woman who does cleaning work.

which also serves as an incentive for those considering this kind of work. Indeed, across India – and in many other countries – there is an increasing number of elderly people who require forms of care and an increasing number of small(er), nuclear families where adult members (men and women) are working outside the home; the result, then, is an increased demand for paid carers/*ayahs* (Vasanthi, 2011: 85). Increasing security concerns for employers, linked to changes in living arrangements and wider fears about terrorism, violence, and crime, also mean that employers often prefer to employ domestic workers who are affiliated with agencies (particularly *ayahs* and drivers), largely because of the assumption that these workers have been ‘vetted’ and thus pose less of a security risk. The increasing demand for paid workers/carers and the preference for agency workers means, as commuters often point out, that agency work is pretty much guaranteed for those who want and can do it. Shushma, an *ayah* in her early thirties, had been advised to work through an agency by friends and while she resented the high cut taken by her agency (in her case, Rs.500 of the Rs.6,000 she earned each month) she nevertheless agreed that finding work through agencies was easy: ‘We’re “centre” girls. If we call them and ask for work, we’ll get it’ (13.06.2015). While city-dwelling workers also use agencies to find work, agencies are especially important for commuters since they often lack networks in the city.

Care work nevertheless has its drawbacks. The most cited response for leaving this work is the requirement of having to work long hours, which takes time away from family; but women also often dislike the work itself, which involves close contact with people’s bodies and waste.

Before my son was born, I did ‘patient care’, taking care of people with fevers, ill people [...] ‘Patients’ used to shit on the bed and seeing it I felt sick. So I left that work and started doing this [...] I like *barite kaaj*, not ‘patient care’. With ‘patient’ *kaaj* there’s a lot to think about and ‘patients’ have all sorts – skin diseases, or they shit on the bed. I couldn’t eat when I did that work (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

Caring for children is, according to many commuters, marginally better than caring for adults, but there are, at the same time, different issues to consider with childcare – including the difficulty of having to look after toddlers who run around and end up hurting themselves. Additionally, care workers doing night ‘duty’ must contend with the problem all shift workers face: exhaustion. Durga (38), who had been doing ‘patient care’ for most of her adult life, explained that she often struggled to rest

properly when working through the night, and that in her latest job, this was made worse by the fact her 'patient (an old man) often only fell asleep late in the night. 'Sometimes he falls asleep, but sometimes he doesn't. I sit in the chair and wait for him to sleep, then I sleep a little' (09.06.2015). Durga also found it unfair that she was not paid anything extra for changing dressings and using medical equipment (oxygen cylinders and so on): 'If a 'sister' [nurse] does dressings, she will take Rs.500. But we don't even get a quarter of that' (09.06.2015). Like most other *ayahs*, Durga had not undertaken formal training (though she had spent some time working in a nursing home); rather she had been given her job at the agency because of her assumed 'feminine' traits ('caring', 'nurturing') and, like other domestic workers, was thus considered 'unskilled' by the agency and her employers.

Agency jobs are also incredibly insecure. In many cases, workers start new jobs every week or month; and, because of the high degree of turnover, it is very difficult to build trust and rapport with employers, and thus to ask for time off and non-wage benefits. Priya explained that she had found it difficult to continually 'adjust'⁶⁶ to new employers when working for an agency; although she did not earn as much doing *thike kaaj* and *rannar kaaj*, she was happier doing this – in large part because she had managed to cultivate close, familial-like relationships with some of her employers and these employers in turn granted her greater flexibility regarding leave (which was important for her as a mother of three) and additional financial support in times of need.

Lauren: Did you do different jobs in those seven years when you worked for an agency?

Priya: We didn't always get long-term jobs, I worked in a lot of different places. They'd give us the address each time I got a new 'duty'. Sometimes it was for fifteen days, sometimes a month or more. It could even be for a year. But once 'duty' ended, I'd have to go back to the 'centre' and get a new job. When one job ended, you'd be given a new 'duty', a new address, and you'd have to search and find it. You become crazy [doing this].

Lauren: What do you think about 'centres', I mean about how they are run?

Priya: I don't like them. I'm 'free' now, I work on my own so I don't like 'centres'.

Sohini: What about the behaviour of the people at the 'centres'?

⁶⁶ The English word 'adjust' was used repeatedly by participants, often when talking about employers and marriage/husbands, but it is also used more generally in India, in everyday conversation. It reflects, as Jane Dyson (2017: 274-275) notes, the extent to which people find it necessary to develop makeshift practical solutions to everyday problems, and it also speaks to shifting/downgrading expectations and compromise in social situations.

Priya: No, it's not that. It's because of the way it works. The man who gave us 'duty' was well-mannered but I didn't like having to search for the houses all the time. Each time I got work, I hoped that it would last a while, that I'd be able to keep earning. Also, once you get a 'duty', you can't take holidays. And if you suddenly take leave, they'll send someone else and if they like that person more, they'll dismiss you. In terms of work, what I'm doing now, even if I don't go for fifteen days, it will be fine. They won't take another girl. I have 'settled' there [...] If I face any problem, I can ask them for help. But if you only work for someone for a short period, you can't form such a bond and when you do ask [for help], they say, "She's getting money from the centre and now she's asking for more!" But in the houses where I work now, I can ask for Rs.2,000 or Rs.10,000 and they'll help me (18.01.2016).

As we shall see in Chapter 6, close, reciprocal relationships help workers to achieve a sense of dignity and respect at work – something which is especially important given persisting structures of class and caste and the fact that workers, in many cases, continue to be subject to (class- and caste-based) avoidance behaviour in employers' homes. Indeed, while employers often do not know or ask about workers' caste and casteism is generally much less overt than it was in the past, workers are still often expected to use separate plates and cups in employers' homes: 'We pour from the same bottle but our glasses are separate' (Chitra, 12.07.2015).⁶⁷

As mentioned earlier, agencies also take a cut of workers' wages and agency workers cannot, as 'direct' workers often can, take days off, there being an implicit expectation – among agency managers and employers – that workers will work continuously until the 'duty' comes to an end: 'If they hear the word 'holiday' (*chuti*), they'll jump' (Shushma, 13.06.2015). If for some reason workers are unable to go into work, they are, then, likely to be replaced by other agency workers, in most cases permanently. There is also the more general problem of trust: because of the high degree of turnover, employers in many cases do not know and trust these workers who are sent to them for often short periods (even though, ironically, one of the reasons employers often prefer to hire agency workers is because of the presumption they have been 'vetted'); this, then, means that workers are frequently dismissed and replaced.

⁶⁷ There is, as Sen and Sengupta note, frequently *an assumption* about workers' low caste (and class) status (2016: 156). Furthermore, as Sharma, notes that employers do not necessarily have to ask about a worker's caste identity since there are often other ways to identify this. For example, if a worker is employed through a family member and this referee's caste identity is known, it can be assumed that the new worker's identity will be the same; similarly, if employers are aware of the worker's village, this too can indicate their caste identity (2016: 54-55).

Additionally, not all women can do this kind of work, which entails long shifts as well as heavy lifting. As indicated already, those doing this work tend to be younger and often too with some level of education (so that they can read 'duty' slips); they also often give this up after a few years, moving into less time-consuming and less physically-demanding forms of work as they get older. In addition, older women and those with health issues arguably struggle to find a continuous flow of jobs in the way that younger women, like Shushma, claim to be able to do. Indeed, in the same agency where I had chatted with agency workers about the problems of childcare, I witnessed an older woman (around the age of 50) storm out after arguing with one of the agency managers about the fact she had not been called for new 'duty'.⁶⁸ Sumit, too, indicated that he often spent periods 'sitting idle', waiting for the agency to call, sometimes having to fill these gaps with security/doorman work (which he did not like) – although in his case these gaps were arguably more to do with the lower demand for 'male attendants' rather than his age (39).

There is, furthermore, evidence that agencies sometimes discriminate against Muslim workers, which reflects the wider prejudice discussed in Chapter 2. In the agency where I spent the most amount of time, the owner, Paromita, told me that she does not deal with Muslim workers since 'parties' (employers), who are mostly Hindu, do not want to employ them. When she suspects workers of being Muslim, she also 'tests' them, and if she finds that she is right she sends them onto other agencies where they can be taught how to dress and pass as Hindus.

Lauren: Do you ask about caste when workers come here?

Paromita: All my workers are Hindus. I don't take Muslims as the parties don't like them. We are told over the phone by the 'parties', "Please do not send Mohamedans."

Lauren: But what about caste? Do you take that information?

Paromita: They are mostly 'Scheduled Caste' but we have no problem with caste. We can tell that the person is Hindu by seeing their surname, say Ruma Mondol. A Mohamedan will have a voter ID card with their surname. We get to know by seeing this.

Lauren: Do employers ever ask about religion or caste?

Paromita: Everybody wants a 'tiptop', *bhadro*, with a little education. They also say, "Don't give us Muslim girls." There's no caste problem though.

Lauren: Do employers ever send workers back because of caste issues?

Paromita: We've not had a problem with caste but there was a time when a party 'discontinued' a girl because she looked Muslim.

Sohini: What do you mean?

⁶⁸ While agency workers were typically women, agency owners/managers/staff were typically men.

Paromita: She wasn't wearing *shakha-pola*.⁶⁹

Lauren: So, do Muslim women sometimes dress as Hindu women to look for work?

Paromita: Yes, but in such cases, I ask them questions like, "How do you say water?" – Hindus say *jol*, Muslims say *pani*. I also ask them to tell me the names of the *thakur* [Hindu deities] on the shelf. Bengali [Hindu] girls immediately identify them. I also catch them [Muslim women] when they say certain words and eventually they confess to me. It's not just how they speak. I sometimes know by the way they dress. But when they come to see me, I don't just send them away. I direct them to other agencies where they can show them how to do *sindoor*, wear *shakha-pola* before starting duty.

Lauren: Do you ever do that here?

Paromita: No, we're a registered agency. Everything is very disciplined here.

Sohini: Which agencies do this?

Paromita: I can't say which exactly but the girls tell me there are such centres. They talk about them...my centre is 14 years old, we're a registered centre but others have only been going a few years. You can find them in newspapers.

Lauren: You mentioned that a lot of families don't want Muslims working for them...

Paromita: [Interrupting, perhaps frustrated] you see, the thing is, what's happening is that some take Mohamedan girls only for cooking and cleaning. Others don't want them at all. My 'clients' tell me not to give them Mohamedan girls. Maybe they're following their religion. Some think about the *thakur* in the house and don't want them. Why the 'clients' don't want these girls, I can't say (07.10.2015).

Although more research is needed on the role of agencies in Kolkata/India, it seems that they do not offer workers anything beyond an initial introduction to employers, and in some cases a degree of mediation – with employers, with respect to food and drink and toilet access, and with workers' families and husbands in cases of abuse and violence. As noted in Chapter 3, and as Paromita herself acknowledged, many agencies are unregistered, fly-by-night establishments. Generally, agencies do not appear to offer workers rights and protections and they do not appear to be contributing to any marked degree of standardisation or professionalisation in the sector; the dominant perception of domestic work – as low-status, menial work – remains (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 101). Being unregulated, they also do not, in most cases, appear to take responsibility for workers' safety and security; agency workers, then, often face the same kinds of problems those working directly face. 'There are some [employers] who are very nasty. They'll make you work for a month and if you take one day off, they cut your money. It isn't even just about cutting the money, it's the way they speak to us [...] It's like they've bought us' (Sangeeta, 13.06.2015). Most

⁶⁹ *Shakha-pola* bangles are typically worn by Hindu women to signify that they are married; one is white and made of conch shell and the other is red and made of coral.

workers, then, are strategic about their use of agencies, hoping to one day cut out the role of the agency and embark on direct relationships with employers where they will be better able to negotiate flexibility over leave and important non-wage benefits.

Wages, Terms, Conditions

Although commuters' (and other domestic workers') wages are not in any way standardised, they are generally very low. Cooking is deemed to be more skilled and respectable work than cleaning and so it generally demands a higher rate of pay, with men (who are perceived to be more skilled) generally being paid more for this work than women.⁷⁰ *Thike kaaj* (washing clothes, cleaning floors, washing dishes), however, is viewed as menial and denigrating – a perception that has much to do with ideas about 'dirt' and caste (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 76; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 99). Working in one house doing *thike kaaj* (where a worker works for a few hours each day), a worker might receive around Rs.500 per month, in total, for her various tasks; and combining work in four households, she might get around Rs.2,000 per month. Cooking, as noted above, fetches slightly better wages, around Rs.800 per household per month.⁷¹ Wage rates also depend, however, on various other factors, including the length of service, whether non-wage benefits (food, clothing etc.) are offered, and the locality/neighbourhood within which the work takes place. In addition, wages are sometimes fixed by the number of tasks, or, in the case of cooking, by the number of people in the household – usually Rs.100-150 for each task/person (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 111). As an illustration of the huge variation in arrangements and wages, Shobna worked in four households doing *thike kaaj* and earning a total of Rs.3,500 per month, while Ruksana earned Rs.4,500 from one house alone, working in this

⁷⁰ The association of high caste, and the relative exclusiveness accorded to the occupation of cooking, and the skills associated with varieties of cuisine, has marked it out as a niche within domestic service (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 99-100). Indeed, Madhumita appeared to take pride in this work, explaining how she would watch cookery programmes to learn different regional cuisines and please employers whom she got along well with.

⁷¹ City-dwelling workers in Sen and Sengupta's study reported even lower wages – Rs.200 per household per month for *thike kaaj* and Rs.500 per household per month for *rannar kaaj* – although this could be because their research was conducted earlier than mine and wages have, in the interim, increased (2016: 107, 112). They also note that, since the number of houses part-time/live-out workers work in and the total time they spend on paid work varies quite significantly, monthly income is a very inexact measure of workers' average earnings, with hourly rates – Rs.6.00 for cooking, Rs.4.95 for cleaning – giving a better sense of this (2016: 103-105).

house from the early morning until the mid-afternoon each day doing a range of cooking and cleaning work.

Ayahs earn the best wages of all, around Rs.6,000 per month, although as noted earlier, this is because they typically work in longer shifts; the figure of Rs.6,000 is based on a worker working 12-hour shifts seven days/nights a week. 'Male attendants', moreover, are paid more for doing the same work as *ayahs* (usually an extra Rs.100 a day), which is typically explained by agency managers in terms of the 'heavy lifting' that men 'attendants' are required to do (since their patients, unlike the patients of *ayahs*, are exclusively men) but which arguably reflects gendered notions of skill and value. Driving – another man's job – similarly fetches better wages, around Rs.8,000 per month for 8 hours' duty or around Rs.11,000 for 10 hours' duty, with an extra Rs.100 generally being given per day for overtime (i.e. work going over 8 hours).⁷² Like the work carried out by 'male attendants', driving is considered to be relatively 'skilled' work, in part because it involves work outside the home and is carried out by men. Generally speaking, however, workers' wages are low – something which can be explained by the fact that this work is (now) understood as 'women's work' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 100). The mediation of the agency or 'centre' has, to a degree, disrupted this homogenous construction but, as noted earlier, most *ayahs* come from the same communities as those engaged in *thike kaaj* and *rannar kaaj* and they do not normally undertake formal training, thus the perception of the 'unskilled' domestic worker remains (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 101).

As in many other contexts, workers, including agency workers, do not have written contracts but rather negotiate with employers verbally. The main issues discussed at the point of employment are the type of work and hours that are required by the employer and the wages that will be paid to the worker, in most cases monthly. Other matters, such as leave, toilet access, and non-wage benefits are typically not discussed, although there is an expectation, among both employers and workers, that workers will be given a bonus for Puja – a sari or two, or, increasingly, a month's salary in cash (Parichiti, 2015: 32). It is not common to specify the length of tenure at

⁷² For reference, the general minimum wage for 'non-skilled' workers in Kolkata/India is about Rs.8,000 per month, Rs.9,000 for 'skilled' workers; retail jobs fetch salaries of between Rs.2,000 and Rs.7,000 a month, though workers also take home various rewards and incentives (Gooptu, 2009: 49).

the point of employment; and, in the case of disagreements or the breakdown of negotiations, there are few formalities in terms of serving notice and fulfilling the terms of contract: employers in many cases fire workers without notice, and workers also often leave jobs without notice (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 110-111). There is no provision for leave, no fixed days off, and there is no question of retirement benefits or sick pay, although employers in some cases provide additional financial assistance to workers in the form of loans (as well as other non-wage benefits, including food, clothing, and support for children's education). Because there are no fixed job descriptions, or clear, written terms of employment, employers often ask workers to undertake tasks which they did not initially agree to do – for instance, cleaning the refrigerator or shopping for snacks when guests visit – tasks which are regarded by workers, but not employers, as 'extra' work (Parichiti, 2015: 26). Sometimes workers are paid for these additional tasks, but, in many cases, they are not; workers generally have very little bargaining power and so in either case feel they cannot refuse (see Chapter 6; Parichiti, 2015: 45). In addition, workers' workloads often increase over time, without commensurate increases in pay; and, because commuters and other live-out workers typically spent short periods in employers' homes each day, they are often expected to cram in a substantial amount of work, often being rushed by employers through their various tasks (see Chapter 6).

Although there is no provision for leave and an implicit expectation that workers will work continuously – seven days a week – unless they *ask* for time off, there is at the same time an understanding that workers can take four days' leave each month. In theory, workers can take these days whenever they like and days can also be rolled over into the next month if they go unused; however, misunderstandings occur frequently between workers and employers, with each party often having very different ideas about how much leave a worker has left to take. Requests for time off are also sometimes refused by employers, which again leads to feelings of bitterness and resentment. Workers themselves do not generally want fixed days off; as noted earlier, they desire flexibility and appreciate being able to take leave when they need it – particularly because, as mentioned, they do not receive sick pay (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 122). Indeed, while women sometimes take leave for special occasions – during Puja or to attend a family wedding or an NGO event – in many cases, they take leave in cases of sickness (their own or children's) or else when they are for other reasons

prevented from going to work.⁷³ Malika indicated that she took leave when she was menstruating or when it rained heavily and there were transport delays; and Anjali said that she generally only took time off to attend medical appointments. Given the intense competition for jobs, workers are likely already concerned about taking leave and so they in many cases only do so when the need arises; they are also aware that if they take prolonged periods of leave, the risk of being replaced increases. At the same time, commuters reject the pressure from employers to work continuously, often getting into arguments with employers over leave and demanding the right to time off on humanitarian grounds (see Chapter 6; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 121-124). They are, as city-dwelling workers are, unwilling to accept the pressure for uninterrupted service, emphasising the ‘human need’ for rest, which they both express verbally and assert – that is, by *taking leave* (see Chapter 6; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 123-124). The high rate of turnover in the sector is, then, caused by both employers sacking workers without notice and workers taking leave/leaving jobs without notice.

Although commuters and other live-out workers are less vulnerable than their live-in counterparts – by virtue of the fact that they do not live with employers – the employment relationship is still often marked by instances of abuse and exploitation, including sexual violence and harassment as well as more everyday forms of indignity and disrespect.⁷⁴ Because, historically, ‘maidservants’ were sexually available to their masters, and the idea of domestic workers as ‘sexually accessible’ persists today, domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to violence and harassment in the workplace (Parichiti, 2015: 45-46; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 149). As in Sen and Sengupta’s study, however, the commuters I met and knew did not report instances of sexual harassment, talking about the issue only in general terms – as something which happened to *other* women (2016: 149) – reflecting ideas about women’s ‘honour’ and the associated stigma around sexual violence.⁷⁵ What is more common

⁷³ Given the nutritional deficit and the physical exertion involved in many domestic work jobs, the incidence of illness (and thus absenteeism) is high (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 121).

⁷⁴ As noted in Chapter 2, employers can subject live-in workers to more severe forms of surveillance and violence, especially if they are young and/or migrants and unaware of their rights; indeed, most stories of abuse which are reported in the media in India involve migrants, young girls and/or live-in workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 147, 150; see also Dey, 2017; Singh & Chettri, 2018).

⁷⁵ The idea that women bring violence/harassment upon themselves (through dressing and behaving ‘inappropriately’) is, of course, not specific to India (Jamieson, 1998: 111; Stubbs-Richardson *et al.*, 2018).

in commuters' accounts is the often degrading nature of the work they are asked to do by employers and the everyday forms of indignity and disrespect they endure in employers' homes (see also Parichiti, 2015: 45) – including being scolded, followed about, and, in various ways, subjected to class- and caste-based avoidance behaviour.

Law & Policy

Given the above discussion, there is an urgent need for legislation and policy to provide domestic workers with the type of rights and benefits that are accorded to other kinds of workers. As indicated earlier, however, domestic work (in India and around the world) does not lend itself easily to regulation nor collective forms of organisation and activism (Vasanthi, 2011; Agarwala & Saha, 2018: 3-4). While, some progress has been made in recent years, attempts to pass legislation and regulate domestic work have been slow and ineffective, with only a few notable gains for workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 237, 245; Marchetti, 2018). Some colonial-era legislation continues to apply to domestic workers, including the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 237; Vasanthi, 2011); and, more recently, legislation has been passed which applies to domestic workers – including the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which considers the home/household a workplace, and the 2012 amendment to the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act, 1986, which specifies that children below the age of fourteen years cannot be employed as domestic workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 235, 238). In addition, there is the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008, which recognises domestic workers as informal workers and provides access to a host of social security schemes, including the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme and the National Family Benefit Scheme.⁷⁶ Attempts to introduce *specific* legislation on domestic work have, however, largely fallen flat. Like other governments, the Indian government has been reluctant to recognise the home/household as a workplace and to pass legislation which could be

⁷⁶ Although the Act recognises domestic workers as informal workers, it only applies to those classed as 'Below Poverty Line', which in practice excludes many domestic workers; furthermore, the act does not cover loss of employment or unemployment – issues which are particularly key for domestic workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 239-241).

perceived as encroaching on this traditionally 'private' space (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 245; Vasanthi, 2011). It is also feared that laws mandating minimum wages and working conditions for domestic workers will lead to a fall in demand for workers, and thus a loss of employment for workers. Furthermore, laws on domestic work would be anyway difficult to enforce considering the extent to which domestic workers are dispersed (Neetha N., 2009); and, finally, there is the political clout of the growing middle class, which would be adversely affected by laws in favour of domestic workers and which has held back legislative efforts (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 237; see also Neetha & Palriwala, 2011: 99).

Despite these difficulties, some specific legislation on domestic work has been passed. Following a Central Government directive in 2010, states including Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have all introduced minimum wage legislation for domestic workers; and Kerala, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh have also extended the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) – a health insurance scheme for the unorganised sector – to domestic workers. In West Bengal, where the RSBY is yet to take off, domestic workers have been included instead in the State Assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unorganised Workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 244-245). Furthermore, in Maharashtra, the government has passed the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act, 2008, recognising domestic workers' right to paid annual leave and weekly rest, and providing, amongst other things, for the registration of domestic workers, the creation of tripartite boards (comprising workers, employers and government representatives), and the constitution of a grievance redress mechanism (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 238). This act also establishes district-level welfare boards which in turn provide workers with financial assistance, maternity benefits, health insurance, and education aid for their children; membership of a pension fund is, moreover, mandatory for workers, with contributions coming jointly from the government, workers, and employers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 238).

In addition, after many years of advocacy, the National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM) filed a public interest litigation demanding comprehensive national legislation for domestic workers and, in 2003, the Supreme Court of India agreed to hear the case (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 241). The Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill 2008 and the slightly altered Domestic Workers Welfare and Social Security Bill 2010 (proposed by the National Commission for

Women) are also now in circulation (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 241), and a draft national policy for domestic workers is similarly underway. This draft policy covers much of what is included in the above 2010 Bill – including the setting up of tripartite boards to stipulate conditions of work, maintain a record of domestic workers, and create a dispute resolution mechanism – but goes further by mentioning an implementation committee that would be attached to the Ministry of Labour and Employment, thus placing domestic work on a par with other kinds of work (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 241-243; *The Times of India*, 2017).⁷⁷ In the international context, there is also the ILO convention on domestic workers outlined earlier, which India – along with Bangladesh and several other countries – initially attempted to block but later became a signatory to (see ILO, 2018; Marchetti, 2018). India is however, yet to ratify C189, the process of ratification requiring that national and state laws are first brought into line with the various provisions of the convention (see ILO, 2018).

To summarise, there have been sporadic attempts by some states to regulate domestic work but even with these attempts there have been significant problems in terms of implementation. Efforts to regulate domestic work at a national level have not yet led to any comprehensive legislation, though some existing legislation – for instance, on sexual harassment and child labour – applies to domestic work/ers and a draft policy for domestic workers is also underway. The difficulties of enforcing such a national policy, however, remain given that this work takes place within the ‘private’ space of the household where inspection would likely be viewed by middle-class employers as an intrusion. Additionally, while processes of institutionalisation have been initiated in India, this is still in its early stages and there has not been any significant alteration in terms of how this work is viewed. Indeed, rather than being viewed as skilled professional work, domestic work continues to be seen as ‘feminine’ and unskilled/menial.

⁷⁷ The draft policy does not, however, prescribe a minimum wage for workers, even though an earlier draft proposed a minimum salary of Rs.9,000 per month for those working eight hours per day. Moreover, as with other social security acts and bills, there is no specific earmarking of resources (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 244).

Domestic Worker Activism

Just as there has been inadequate progress in terms of law and policy on domestic work in India, there has been a limited amount of organising among domestic workers, which has happened more in certain parts of the country than others and is mainly initiated by civil society movements and NGOs rather than by trade unions and political parties (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 254-271). Conventional trade unions have, across India, typically focused on organising (men) workers in mills and factories; they have been largely reluctant to organise women workers, who mostly work in the informal sector, and especially domestic workers who have typically been viewed as women to be protected rather than workers deserving of labour rights (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 254). It has only been very recently that central trade unions such as the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) have begun to organise domestic workers and that too only in some states (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 254). Women have also themselves resisted identifying as workers, and particularly as *domestic workers* due to the historic and continuing association between this work and low caste/class-status. Women's families also often oppose them attending union meetings (where men are present), and furthermore, trade union leaders and activists are themselves invariably employers of domestic workers, this entrenched vested interest creating difficulties around questions of minimum wages and leave and holding back efforts to unionise workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 256).

In the absence of trade union interest, much of the effort to organise domestic workers in India has thus come from civil society and feminist groups (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 254). The Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana (Pune City Domestic Workers Association), formed in Pune, Maharashtra in 1980, is among the more well-known examples of such activism. With a membership of over 15,000 women, the Sanghatana has established a charter of rights for domestic workers and organised various marches, rallies, and strikes over the years; as part of a broader Maharashtra network, it has also been active in calling for legislation on domestic work – hence why the state passed the Welfare Board Act in 2008 (Gothoskar, 2018). Another significant example is the National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM), which, beginning in Mumbai in 1985, has grown into a movement encompassing 23 states and 28 languages and encouraging domestic workers across the country to fight for

their rights (NDWM). Furthermore, in Hyderabad, the Andhra Pradesh State Domestic Workers Union affiliated to the NDWM has brought domestic workers into the schedule of employment under the minimum wages Act of 1948 (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 256); and, in Kerala, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is attempting to unionise and professionalise domestic work, playing a role in recruitment, acting as a union, and encouraging training and skill-building (Devika *et al.*, 2011; Agarwala & Saha, 2018: 6).

In West Bengal, there has not yet been any serious attempt to organise domestic workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 232), although news of the registration of a new domestic workers' union – the Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samiti (PGPS), or the West Bengal Domestic Workers Society – in June 2018 has provided renewed hope (*The Hindu*, 2018). Trade unions have generally been less sensitive here to women's issues than they have in other parts of the country, and so even though auto-rickshaw drivers and hawkers have been brought into the ambit of federated affiliated unions – including the CITU and the INTUC – domestic workers have been, until very recently, ignored (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 261). Indeed, it is unfortunate, as Sen and Sengupta note, that in three and a half decades of left government rule, West Bengal did not see as much progress on unionisation in this sector as other states: 'the question of women workers generally and women domestic workers specifically, seem to have been left out of the Left' (2016: 265). There is a distinct lack of occupational identity and community among Kolkata's domestic workers – or at least in the communities where they live; and, as noted above, there is also a direct conflict of interest between many trade unionists (who are themselves employers) and workers, which hinders organisation among domestic workers.

As has been the case more generally in India, then, it has been left to NGOs and other organisations connected to the women's movement to take up the cause of domestic workers' rights in West Bengal. Parichiti, the NGO with which I worked during fieldwork, was one of the first organisations in this context to do so. Conceived in the mid-1990s and registered as a society in 2000, the main aim of Parichiti, meaning 'identity', is to support and mobilise women domestic workers so that they can articulate and secure their rights (Parichiti, 2015: 2-3). The NGO began its work with a focus on commuting domestic workers, establishing contact at Dhakuria and Bagha Jatin railway stations and using these meetings to pass on information about

their services – which include a *bishram ghar* (rest room), social events, and local ‘solution groups’. Staff also regularly assist workers in cases of violence and abuse, intervening on their behalf with employers and husbands/families (Parichiti, 2015: 60-69); and, although they predominantly work with commuting workers, they have, over the years, assisted many child and live-in workers, who are, as noted earlier, particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Parichiti, 2015: 53-69). While these interventions do not, generally, achieve the wider reach and coverage that follow from interventions made by trade unions, political parties, and government, efforts to build alliances and platforms with other groups and organisations working on similar or wider issues affecting women are ongoing. Staff are, for instance, in touch with the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW); and, through the South Asia Women’s Fund (SAWF), Parichiti has been part of South Asia platforms focused on the rights of domestic workers. Because Parichiti’s founding members hailed from the women’s movement, they have also been able to gather support from other activists in the movement in Kolkata and elsewhere. In addition, Parichiti is part of the Maitree network – a network of women’s groups in Kolkata – and Parichiti and its members regularly participate in programmes and campaigns organised by Maitree. It is also in close touch with Jagori, a women’s group based in Delhi with whom Parichiti collaborated in survey research (see Parichiti & Jagori, 2012).

It is perhaps due to the work of Parichiti and other groups⁷⁸ that the position of central trade unions in West Bengal has, in recent years, started to shift, with several union representatives now speaking about the need for unionisation and the fixation of wages (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 269). While this, and the registration of the PGPS, provides hope for workers and their allies, attempts to establish unions are, however, still often ignored by the Labour Department, or else met with negative responses which highlight the difficulties of attempting to organise workers in a context where there are multiple employers and employees and where the ‘workplace’ is the traditionally ‘private’ space of the home (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 267). The government of West Bengal is also still closed to the idea of minimum wage fixation, agreeing instead to expand welfare and training schemes (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 269). Moreover, even where domestic worker unions have been initiated, there are

⁷⁸ Sristy, for instance, worked to help form the PGPS, which comprises 5,000 plus members from different districts of the state (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 269).

questions about the political positions taken by these unions. For instance, while the Paschimbanga Grihasahayika Mahila Samiti, the union initiated by the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), focuses on important issues such as job security, sexual harassment, maternity leave, regular leave, free passes on transport, and the provision of toilet facilities in urban and rural areas, there is, at the same time, an equal focus on the needs of employers and workers in their discourse, something which stands in contrast to the usual worker-centric discourse that is adopted by unions (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 263-265). The emphasis on the 'affordability' of domestic work and the convenience of employers in particular reflects a middle-class ideology and reinforces the idea that the middle-class home is a haven for workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 263-265).

While, then, domestic worker activism has gained some ground in India and important steps have been taken in some states with regard to unionisation and professionalisation, in Kolkata and West Bengal this type of mobilisation is still in a very nascent stage. None of my participants reported belonging to any union or political party, though Madhabi indicated that her house had come from a 'party', suggesting that she and/or her husband had, at some point, had a political connection, and many were, as noted, connected to Parichiti. Having said this, there is a strong awareness of exploitation which is sometimes articulated in the language of leftist protest; and while there is a lack of occupational identity in the communities where domestic workers live, commuting workers are, as we shall see later, mobilising on and through the commute.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed two main, but overlapping narratives emerging from commuters' accounts in relation to questions of work and commuting. The first, which corresponds roughly to those in relatively more difficult circumstances, is one of misfortune, suffering, and patriarchal failure, and the second is a more positive hopeful one, centred on children and children's education and which relates primarily to those in a relatively better position, and who are typically younger and with earning husbands etc. We have also seen how, for this latter group, there is in some sense a 'preference' for domestic work – at least over other informal sector options. Indeed,

even though domestic work is not in any way desirable work and commuters (like other workers) unanimously reject this for their daughters, women often move into this work from other kinds of work, desiring flexibility to combine income generation with unpaid domestic and care responsibilities at home. Commuters also make certain choices *within* work – including in relation to what type of work they do and how many hours they work – their preferences and priorities shifting over time and, again, in relation to their specific circumstances. With little or no education and with few options in terms of employment (for women and men), women are in some sense pushed into domestic work; however, they are at the same time active agents who move in and out of different kinds of (domestic) work, carving out the best possible situation for themselves and their families.

We have also seen how, as with work, there is on some level a ‘preference’ for commuting – at least for some women and in the context of a limited set of options. Indeed, while commuting entails costs in terms of time, energy, and money and it also becomes increasingly difficult with age, it can, in some cases, enable workers to live a better life than they otherwise would be able to in the city (where their only option is to live in informal settlements which are overcrowded, dirty, and often unsafe for children and where, importantly, they have no real chance of being able to own land and property). In addition, the chapter has discussed the nature of the work itself, providing details about wages, terms, and conditions and mapping the broader context of law, policy, and activism within which this work takes place. As we have seen, attempts to introduce legislation and policy on domestic work have generally been sketchy and poorly-implemented; and efforts to organise workers have lagged behind in West Bengal/Kolkata. Nevertheless, the winds appear to be changing and the registration of a new union for domestic workers in June 2018 provides some hope for workers and their allies, as does the fact that commuting domestic workers are, in many cases, mobilising in and through the commute – a topic that is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter Five: Getting to & from Work

In this chapter, I focus on the *experience* of the commute, offering a discussion around the first part of my central research question, *How do commuting domestic workers experience the commute, both day-to-day and over time?* and providing an ethnographic account of commuting as articulated and experienced by commuting domestic workers. Like Tahire Erman and Hilal Kara (2018: 46), I argue that women's 'travel stories' are academically and politically important, shedding light on how commuting domestic workers are experiencing and negotiating changes in the landscape of domestic work in India as well as the more general, global problem of a lack of space and affordable housing in the city. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first part discusses the challenges of commuting – the expense, the overcrowding, the toll on women's health and bodies – and the second part explores the possibilities and opportunities that commuting travel presents. I show that, while commuting affords women the chance to earn money and, in some cases, own land and property, the experience of commuting is nevertheless articulated in terms of pain and suffering (*koshto*) and those who can give it up after a certain point do so. I also show that commuting offers several possibilities and opportunities, which do not outweigh or equal the challenges associated with commuting (and certainly not for those enduring relatively more difficult circumstances) but rather provide some form of consolation to those undertaking these often long and gruelling journeys. Most importantly, the chapter explores how commuting workers forge valuable networks and solidarities which may, in turn, provide them with the collective strength they need to bargain for better conditions of work in the city.

Challenges of Commuting

While commuting is an important livelihood strategy for women and their families, it is one of the most difficult parts of women's working lives (see also Mehrotra, 2010: 32). Women use various modes of transport to get to work – van-rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, local trains – and all of these cost money (see Figures 7, 8 & 9). Travelling between Sonarpur and Dhakuria (a south Kolkata neighbourhood) each day, workers are likely to spend Rs.300 per month on train tickets alone, and those travelling longer

distances pay more. Unsurprisingly, women see the expense as one of the major drawbacks of commuting: ‘Half of our money goes on travel expenses’ (Shobna, 12.12.2015). It is possible to buy a discounted monthly railway pass, which costs between Rs.70 and Rs.100 per month depending on the distance of the journey, but many women find this difficult to afford (Ghatak, 2014: 255). In 2009, a cheaper ticket called ‘*izzat*’ (meaning ‘honour’) was introduced, at Rs.25 per month, for workers earning less than Rs.1,500; however, because of the time and documentation required to obtain one of these tickets, and the income ceiling, few domestic workers have these (Ghatak, 2014: 255; Parichiti, 2015: 35-36; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93). Indeed, Parichiti reports that only those with connections at the *panchayat* office or Block Development Officer’s office can obtain these tickets relatively easily; others, without such connections, must run around to get one, perhaps missing a day of work which, as we shall see in Chapter 7, is risky (Parichiti, 2015: 35-36).



Figure 7. Women travelling by van-rickshaw. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.



Figure 8. Passengers travelling in an auto-rickshaw. Photo by Madhabi, 2015 (reproduced with permission).



Figure 9. Women waiting to board a local train. Photo by Madhabi, 2015 (reproduced with permission).

Many women, of course, travel without tickets – something which became clear early on during fieldwork when meeting women at train stations (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93). We – Basudha, Sohini and myself – were often the only ones with tickets, and if I happened to ask women whether they had tickets, they almost always said that their passes had recently expired.

On Sunday, Basudha and I went to Sealdah to meet Fatema and her friend Ruksana, whom we had not met before. Being unfamiliar with the layout of the station, Basudha and I decided to arrive a little earlier – around 3.30pm – giving us time to find the gate and buy tickets. We found the gate without too much trouble in the end but we were glad of the extra time since there was a queue at the ticket desk when we arrived. Fatema and Ruksana arrived not long after and, after introducing ourselves to Ruksana and chatting briefly

about Eid, we made our way into the station interior and towards the platforms. I had presumed that Fatema would have her own monthly pass, as she had said something of this kind to me before; but when I asked if the pair had tickets Fatema said that her pass had just run out. She started to make her way over to the ticket counter. I felt embarrassed, and frustrated with myself for asking about tickets – especially as I had not thought to buy an extra one for Fatema. Basudha felt similarly uncomfortable and shouted over to Fatema, who was halfway to the ticket counter, that she needn't buy a ticket on our account. Fatema smiled and came back towards us; however, as we started to make our way over to the platforms, we spotted two ticket checkers and, without saying a word, Fatema doubled back towards the counter, returning ten or so minutes later with a ticket in her hand (field notes, 28.07.2015).

Although ticketless travel appears to be practised widely among commuting domestic workers (at least on certain train routes), it carries risks. Indeed, when Fatema went to buy her ticket, Ruksana explained that if Fatema had attempted to pass by the ticket-checkers without a ticket, she would have been stopped and humiliated; the ticket-checkers, Ruksana added, use 'filthy language' and sometimes search commuters. Workers also worry about being forced to pay fines and bribes (Parichiti & Jagori, 2012: 9; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93), or being 'taken' by ticket-checkers, and subsequently harassed and mistreated (Parichiti, 2015: 36). For these reasons, and because workers more generally struggle to afford transport costs, organisations working with domestic worker are demanding free transport (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 93).

Commuting also takes time and energy. Depending on where women live and the availability of public transport, travelling to work can take anything up to four hours each day – a significant chunk of time which women could otherwise spend in their own homes, with their own families. One of the longest and most difficult commutes I encountered was that undertaken by Charu, who lived in a village close to Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas. Waking up between three and three-thirty each morning, Charu would begin her journey by walking a mile through her village; on reaching her local train station, she would then take the Lakshmikantapur Local to Ballygunge Junction in Kolkata, often standing for the full one-hour-ten-minute journey. From Ballygunge Junction, she would walk for a further fifteen minutes, weaving her way through the busy thoroughfare of Gariahat before ringing the doorbell to the first of four houses where she worked. Door to door, this was a journey of around two hours, though, as

Charu explained, sometimes she saved time by taking an auto to and from Ballygunge Junction (this would, however, entail spending money that she could not really afford). Travelling with Charu back to her village that morning after we had met at my friend's house, Basudha and I insisted on taking (and paying for) an auto to the station; it was incredibly hot and Charu had warned us that we had a long journey ahead of us.

After reaching the station, I bought our tickets, leaving Basudha and Charu to chat beside a pillar. We then wandered over to the platform, hearing, from the overhead speakers, that our train was delayed. We walked further down the platform to where the women-only compartment would pull up and where there were already several other women stood about waiting. There was no overhead canopy and the sun was beating down on our heads; Charu took out her umbrella and the three of us crowded together underneath it. The train arrived fifteen minutes later. As it rolled in, we could see that the women's carriage was already packed to the hilt. We walked a bit further down the platform, to get on at the next carriage – one of the general compartments – and clambered up. It was, again, crowded inside but seemed more bearable than the ladies' carriage. We stood all the way to Jaynagar, pressed up against one another and holding on to the overhead handles. When we got down at the other end, after an hour, I felt weak and dehydrated; I'd been unable to reach around into my bag to get my water bottle. I suggested that we stop briefly at one of the nearby stalls to drink some coconut-water (*daab'er jo!*) but Charu said that she could give us *daab* (coconut) for free at her house. I persisted, explaining as best I could that Sohini and I should probably have something *before* setting off walking; Charu smiled, acknowledging that we were not used to such long train journeys. I bought three coconuts and we spent the next few minutes slurping through our straws in silence, grateful for the chance to rest a little. Afterwards, feeling a little revived, we set off down the main road, turning a few minutes later onto a dirt track leading away from the hubbub of the station and towards a greener landscape made up of farmland and paddy field. Charu said that she sometimes takes van-rickshaws (*garis*) for this part of the journey, but more often she walks to save money. We followed her down increasingly narrow, winding paths, until the brick houses turned to mud ones. When we reached her house, which was surrounded by vegetation, we met her son, daughter-in-law, grandson, and husband, all of whom had been informed that we were coming. Charu's husband ushered us inside and told us to make ourselves comfortable on the bed. Basudha and I were relieved to be out of the sun, though the humidity in the room was suffocating – even with the fan whirring noisily overhead. We were all glad when the heavens opened half an hour later, bringing some much-needed relief (field notes, 17.05.2015).

Even though, in this case, we had taken an auto instead of walking, the journey to Charu's home was still incredibly long and difficult and it did not escape me as we rested on Charu's bed afterwards that she made this journey every day, twice a day.

Moreover, as already noted, Charu would usually walk this distance – indeed, walking at both ends of her train journey – and so her daily journey was even longer and more arduous than the one we had done together. On the train back to Kolkata, I thought about all of this, about Charu’s predicament and the fact that her decision to walk, while enabling her to save money, meant that she would be under even greater time pressure with respect to her own, unpaid domestic labour. I also worried that our visit would mean that she would have less time for rest than usual. Charu told us that she does not generally rest until around ten-thirty at night, starting on her ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 2003 [1989]) immediately after coming home from work (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 198-210). Her heavy burden of unpaid domestic work, and the time it took her to travel to and from Kolkata, was in fact the reason Charu worked for only a few hours in employers’ homes each day. Moreover, if Charu was late in reaching home, for instance if employers asked her to stay longer at work, she would become frustrated, worrying about all she would still have to do.

When my work is finished, sometimes they ask me to do some other small tasks, like cutting vegetables or kneading the bread. That means spending another half an hour to do that. The problem is when I miss my train. I get very angry when I come home late and have to serve the food late. I lose my temper. The whole journey back, I’m also so hungry and irritable with others (Charu, 16.05.2015).

For Madhabi, being late to finish work meant that she was not only late in reaching home, and thus late to start her second shift, but that she was also travelling at what was peak time for domestic workers working in and around Dhakuria Railway Station. Madhabi usually finished her work around one o’clock in the afternoon, travelling back to her village (which was close to Ghutiari Sharif, along the Canning line) around one-thirty; however, if she was asked to stay late at work, she would not reach Dhakuria Station until two or three o’clock, meaning that she would be forced to board a much busier train. The following quotation from Madhabi encapsulates the sense of struggle and helplessness involved in commuting at peak time when the women-only compartment(s), commonly referred to as the ‘ladies’ carriage’, would be so densely packed that passengers would literally have to push and shove their way on, often ending up in the doorway of the train or clinging perilously to the outside of it (see Figures 10 & 11): ‘When the train becomes crowded, you just have to hang on. Life or death, anything can happen, and there’s no end to it (*jokhon traine kuhb bhir hoy*,

tokhon julte-julte jete hoy. Tokhon moroner jiboner kono shesh thake na) (Madhabi, 12.10.2015).



Figure 10. Inside the ladies' carriage. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.



Figure 11. Outside the ladies' carriage. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.

Overcrowding is particularly bad on occasions where trains have been cancelled or delayed, as we – Basudha, Sohini and myself – discovered during fieldwork. Waiting on the platform at Dhakuria or Ballygunge, we would often be caught off guard when the train we had been waiting for eventually arrived. We would be swept up into the crowd and thrust up into the ladies' carriage before the train had even come to a halt; from there, we would be pushed further and further inside until we were pressed up against others on all sides. Sometimes we enjoyed the boisterous jostling, joining in with the jovial cries of '*oh baba*' and rewarding ourselves with ice lollies and fizzy drinks at the other end; however, just as often we found these journeys incredibly

testing and draining. Arguments would frequently break out around us, or between us and other commuters – usually about how much space we or others were taking up – and, getting down at the other end, our limbs would be weak and wobbly, our clothes soaked with sweat.

Yesterday Sohini and I went to see Madhabi in Ghutiari Sharif. It'd been a month since I'd last seen Madhabi and I was keen to introduce Sohini to her. I also wanted to give Madhabi something for Puja so Sohini and I met earlier at Gariahat and I bought a pink and green woven sari, which Sohini assured me would soften with washing. Afterwards, we went to Ballygunge station, reaching just after 3pm. The Canning Local was delayed and so I suggested to Sohini that we board the next train to Sonarpur and from there take an auto to Ghutiari Sharif. We made it to Sonarpur and stopped for ten minutes to have a drink at one of the nearby shops; we then asked the auto drivers about getting to Ghutiari Sharif but they all shook their heads, telling us that the train was the only way. It was almost four o'clock and we knew that the delayed Canning train would soon be passing through so we wandered back to the platform. Sohini was hesitant to cross the tracks and so I used the opportunity to take a few photos from the overhead bridge. Predictably, the train was late again and so we spent another half an hour stood on the platform. I noticed a few police officers were dotted about – likely because of the Puja crowds. When the train eventually arrived, we were pushed and shoved up into the ladies' carriage. We didn't get very far inside and half of my body was still hanging outside of the train as it started to move. Worst of all, there was a woman to the left of me, clinging to the outside of the train and shouting at me to move further inside. There was nowhere to go and the women on the other side of me were also pushing back. If it hadn't been for the police officer who had spread his arms along the doorway, holding me in, I might have been pushed out or into the woman on the outside of the train, causing her to fall. I'd lost Sohini when we first got on but I could see her again now, her head poking through an opening in the crowd; she was further inside and looked panicked. I reached out for her hand and told her that we'd get down as soon as we could. As it turned out, most of the women around us were getting down at the next stop and so we decided to stay on, working our way back to one another and then leaning against the backs of the seats for the rest of the journey. Sohini was okay thankfully, though she told me that the women on the train had been shouting at her for getting on. She said that they'd threatened her, telling her that if she didn't move or get down at the next stop they'd push her onto the tracks. I was incredibly relieved when we met Madhabi's husband at the van stand and he told us that Madhabi had passed through half an hour earlier and was probably at home (field notes, 13.10.2015).

While in this case, extreme overcrowding was related to the fact that it was almost Puja and the pre-festival crowds were placing extraordinary strain on local transport, causing delays and disruptions across the board, commuters experience delays and

overcrowding regularly – particularly during the rainy season when heavy rain and flooding wreaks havoc in and around the city (see also Parichiti, 2015: 37). This overcrowding can be extremely dangerous,⁷⁹ and the combined heat and crush during summer and monsoon months also makes the conditions on trains incredibly difficult to bear. During a particularly uncomfortable August journey, Basudha and I noticed a woman swaying near the door of the train, as if she were about to faint. We held on to her arms, supporting her as best we could, and when the train drew to a halt at Ghutiari Sharif (where we were all getting down), she tumbled forward out of the door and vomited. This woman may, of course, have been suffering with a stomach-related illness, which is common during the rainy season, but equally the intense heat and crush inside the carriage likely also played a role.

These various challenges are, of course, compounded for commuting domestic workers since they must undertake these journeys day in, day out. Employers rely heavily on domestic workers and when workers take leave or do not show up to work, this causes a major upheaval in the employer's household. Even during the rainy season, when employers themselves frequently stay home from work, and when, as noted above, there are frequent transport delays, domestic workers are expected to make the journey into the city; they are in fact among the few groups of people you will see wading through knee-deep water when life for the rest of the city has come to a standstill. Moreover, because of intense job insecurity – discussed in the next chapter – workers are aware that if they miss a day of work or are repeatedly late to employers' homes, they will not only be scolded by employers but also possibly dismissed (Roy, 2003: 84; Ray & Qayum, 2010: 90; Parichiti, 2015: 44). 'Even if I am very sick – if I'm throwing up or have loose motions – I have to go' (Ranjani, 13.05.2015). With workers feeling under pressure to reach work on time no matter what their circumstances, train delays are a constant source of worry: 'We wake up very early to catch the train. We go to the platform and see that the train is late. We sit there, keep looking at the tracks for the train. "When will the train come? When will we be able to reach work? If we reach late, they'll scold us." That's what we're thinking' (Madhabi, 12.10.2015).

⁷⁹ In September 2017, twenty-two people died and many others suffered injuries when overcrowding on the overhead footbridge at Elphinstone railway station in Mumbai – where commuters had been sheltering from the heavy rain – led to a stampede (*BBC News*, 2017).

The stresses and strains of commuting take a considerable toll on women's physical and mental health, and workers also often face little understanding from employers when they arrive at their homes late. Shobna, like many mothers, struggled to board trains with her young son, Bijoy, and, fearing the crush inside the ladies' carriage, often decided to wait for less crowded trains to pass through. Waiting, however, meant that she would be late for work, and thus scolded by her employers, who, with the exception of one family, had little patience for her 'excuses'. Bijoy, too, would be humiliated by his teachers, or simply not allowed to enter the school.

You cannot get on easily with your kid. That's why I face problems. What can I say? We suffer a lot (*Ki bolbo? Khub koshto hoy*). At work, they say, "Why are you late? Is it that every day you have a train problem?" They say these kind of things. But we tell them. We travel in trains and, for me it's worse because I have to go with my son. We also want to reach on time because we have to take our kids to school. If my son is late, the 'madams' make him stand. But they [employers] don't see this. They do everything by the clock and say, "If you can't come on time, then leave" (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

Additionally, in the rainy season, commuters face problems not just in stations and on trains, but also *in getting to* stations, as well as in their personal lives. Madhabi's house, like many others in her village, was made from a combination of brick and mud and when we visited her that day prior to Puja, we could see that the entire front part of her house had fallen away during a recent downpour. Many other homes, she told us, had been destroyed completely by the heavy rain, and people were having to shelter in the nearby school. Figure 12, which was taken from the roof of the school, shows the extent of the flooding.

Baba! There was a lot of trouble. That village, this village – they've all been badly affected. We've been okay this time. The water didn't come in the house but a lot of other people had to leave their homes. In another village, most of the people left. They just took some basic things – bedding – and are staying at the school. In another village, it's the same – walls collapsed and people had to go to the school. Have you seen the people putting sand in front of the school, for the path? It'll make it easier for them to go in and out...I don't think it's ever rained as much as it has this year [...] I was worried about what would happen – there was a point when I felt we would also have to go to the school but thank God, the water didn't come inside. The walls of people's homes collapsed and everyone was falling sick. If it had kept raining, ours would have also collapsed. A lot of people have also been ill with the bad water, 'diarrhoea'. We have to wash in that water, cook with it. A lot of people in the other village have been ill, some of the animals have died [...] Even one-storey buildings in Kolkata were submerged in water. I was thinking about you

and whether you were okay. At Dhakuria, it was very bad. Travelling is so difficult when it's flooded. We have to wade through the water and cars go speeding past and you get absolutely drenched (Madhabi, 09.08.2015).



Figure 12. A view from the roof of the school in Madhabi's village. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2015.

Although Madhabi's account highlights several different challenges associated with heavy rain and flooding, including the difficulty of finding clean drinking water and the spread of sickness and disease, one of the main problems commuting domestic workers face is water-logging and the time it takes to get from one place to another. Unlike in the city where flooding dries up relatively quickly, villages remain water-logged for months, forcing those who travel to the city to wade through dirty water and mud before even reaching their local stations. Moreover, women again often face a lack of understanding from employers when they arrive at employers' homes late and/or wearing sodden, muddied clothes.

Lauren: It must be so difficult in the rainy season. I came here and saw the water a few months ago...

Shobna: We almost drowned!

Bijoy: It was up to here! [hold his hands up to his chest]

Shobna: [laughing] That place near the auto stand, where there's a temple. Over there it was up to our chests. We used to change our clothes there but even then we'd get soaked and there was nowhere else to change until I reached work. I used to carry clothes with me in my bag and sometimes I'd stop at someone's house on the way to work to change. We'd carry the wet clothes with us and dry them at work. But our *babus* would say, "After so many days, it's still flooded?" They'd compare it to Kolkata but in Kolkata the water only stays for a few hours. Here it stays for three months. Now it's fine – it's dried up – but it takes a long time.

Lauren: How did you manage?

Shobna: He walks by himself usually but when the water was deep, I have to pick him up and carry him. Once I fell in the deep water (*kha!*) while I was

carrying him... Kolkata people think, "How can there still be water? It's been two or three days since it rained. It's still not dried up?" I tell them, "Come along with us. I'll even pay for you!" Do they think that we wet our clothes on purpose and go to work like that?

Sohini: When they say these things, what do you think they're bothered about? What are they annoyed about?

Shobna: They don't like us drying our clothes on the roof or when we wash them in the bathroom. They say it costs money using their water [...]

Lauren: Do your employers know about all of this, how difficult it is for you during the rainy season?

Shobna: They know but they don't understand. They don't want to. They only understand that we work for them – that's all they care about. In all the houses where I work, no one understands. Instead they complain (12.12.2015).

While Shobna notes here that employers say they do not like workers washing their clothes because it uses their water and costs them money, there is, as we shall also see in the next chapter, also a general reluctance among employers to allow workers to use their toilets, which stems from ideas of caste and class, as well as historical and continuing practices of separate toilet use. The issue of toilet-use affects all live-out workers, but it is, again, compounded for commuters since unlike city-dwelling workers, they cannot go home during the day for toilet breaks, and they also face problems on the journey to work as well as in the city. Local, commuter trains do not have toilets, nor do many of the stations outside of the city, and busy, central stations like Dhakuria and Bagha Jatin tend to only cater for men (Ghatak, 2014: 258). Moreover, where women's toilets do exist, in train stations and around the city, they are often highly unsanitary or pay-per-use – sometimes both (see also Raaj, 2009; Parichiti, 2015: 47; Coffey & Spears, 2017).

When visiting women at home, we would try to remember to use the toilet before making our way back to Kolkata, often being taken to the one *pucca* toilet in the village; but, on a few occasions, we forgot to ask and afterwards struggled to find a place to go. One of these occasions had been after my second visit to Mithu's home when, as outlined in Chapter 3, Mithu became upset talking about her finances and Sohini and I had struggled to comfort her. Indeed, having left Mithu's home in something of a blur, it was not until we were back on the platform at Betberia Ghol station, after midday, that I realised I had not been to the toilet since leaving my flat in the early morning.

We asked a few people on the platform if there was a women's toilet but nobody seemed to know. There was a men's urinal down the platform so I assumed that there must be a women's toilet somewhere, on the other side

perhaps. We crossed over and found what we were looking for – a woman's toilet – but the door was broken, part of it missing, and it also looked like it hadn't been cleaned in a long time. It was hot on the platform and I could feel myself becoming increasingly annoyed. I turned to a man standing near us, asking him, rather petulantly, where I should go, but he just shrugged and smiled, which further irritated me. We then went over to the ticket counter, and Sohini complained to the man there, but he said there was nothing he could do, so, in the end, we left the station (we had the time as our train was not due for an hour) and approached one of the nearby ramshackle houses. I was, by now, unhopeful of finding a toilet, but Sohini persisted in asking around and eventually a woman pointed us in the direction of an outdoor toilet which was curtained off with a piece of old fabric. The toilet was filthy, but it was, at least, relatively well-hidden; I went as quickly as I could and then joined Sohini on the path leading back to the station (field notes, 25.09.2015).

This was, undoubtedly, one of the most challenging days of fieldwork, and, reflecting on this later, I feel somewhat uneasy about how I had behaved, the way in which I had addressed the man on the platform, and the uncomfortable position I had placed Sohini in by making such a fuss – especially given that this was, as noted, her first day on the job. I have also since deliberated about whether and how to include this data given the ethical issues discussed in Chapter 3 and the fact that describing the poor condition of toilets in India runs the risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes about 'the Third World'. As with violence, however, it is arguably *more* problematic *not* to write about toilet access given that this is a problem commuting domestic workers, and women generally, deal with daily (see also Raaj, 2009; Coffey & Spears, 2017).

If there are (usable) women's toilets in stations and around the city, they are often flooded with dirty water during the rainy season, again making them unusable for months at a time – something which is particularly frustrating for commuting domestic workers since, as Shobna indicated, this is the time when they must change their clothes several times each day. If, then, workers are not able to access toilets on trains, in stations and around the city, and if they are also not allowed to use the toilet in employers' homes (or able to access a *kaajer lok* toilet within reasonable distance of where they are working), there are few options available to them. They can stop by the road or in a field on their way to work, or they can go 'in secret' in employers' homes (Parichiti, 2015: 47). 'Sometimes when I'm washing clothes, I just keep the door shut and do what I need to do. What else can I do?' (Madhabi, 13.05.2015). Going to the toilet out in the open entails safety risks for women (Anand, 2014); but,

equally, stealing a moment at work, where, as we shall see, workers are often closely monitored, can mean being caught and dismissed. The only other option – not going at all, from the time of leaving home often in the early morning until the time of returning often in late afternoon or early evening – is not only extremely uncomfortable (particularly for those who are pregnant or menstruating), but can lead to the development of urinary tract infections (Parichiti, 2015: 47-48; Menon, 2015).

Besides toilets, there are various other problems relating to station infrastructure that commuters must grapple with. Fans in stations and on trains are frequently broken, and lights are often either broken or missing, with railway authorities reporting theft as the chief reason for this (Ghatak, 2014: 259). Additionally, clean drinking water is not always available in stations, and there is often nowhere to sit and wait in case of a delay or cancellation (Ghatak, 2014: 259). The latter issue is compounded by the fact that commuters are sometimes questioned or asked to move by police and station personnel if found 'loitering'.⁸⁰ Mithu (45), for instance, was once approached by a police officer while crouching down on the platform at Bagha Jatin after finishing work; she had not been feeling well and so had decided to rest for a moment, when the police officer began to question her, then calling Mithu's agency (presumably to verify her story) and asking someone from the agency to come and accompany her home.⁸¹ There is also often a lack of covered areas in stations to protect commuters from sun exposure and heavy rain, and village paths and roads are usually poorly lit (if at all), which means that women who leave their homes in the early morning must walk along these paths and roads in near or complete darkness. Madhabi worries about accidents since there are also often vehicles on the road near her house in the early morning, while others are concerned with theft, sexual harassment, and violence (see also Parichiti, 2015: 37-38). The problem of poor lighting exacerbates feelings of

⁸⁰ The lack of rest spaces in cities is a much broader problem in India and one that predominantly affects poor and working-class women. If a woman stops to rest for a second, for instance on someone's doorstep or on a street corner, she is perceived to be up to something unsavoury (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 89). The 'why loiter' campaign, initiated by feminist activists in 2014, aims to tackle such perceptions and reclaim public space for women (Khan *et al.*, 2011; Jain, 2014).

⁸¹ Recounting this episode, Mithu seemed to suggest that the police officer had made this phone call because he was concerned about her wellbeing; however, considering the officer's earlier questions and the more general discourse about loitering (based on ideas about women's respectability or lack thereof), it is likely that this officer had been motivated, at least in part, to move Mithu and the other women along.

vulnerability among women commuters, which is why in many cases they prefer to travel in small groups (see Figure 13) – a strategy that is followed by domestic workers across India (Mehrotra, 2010: 3) and women around the world (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; Graglia, 2016).



Figure 13. Domestic workers making their way home together after work. Photo by Madhabi, 2015 (reproduced with permission).

Just as women prefer to travel in small groups when making their way through villages and around the city, they often prefer to travel in the ladies' carriage when travelling to and from the city by train. Separate carriages for women were introduced in India, as they were in other parts of the world, in response to concerns about women's modesty and safety, and particularly to fears about sexual harassment, referred to colloquially as 'eve teasing' (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Dunckel-Graglia, 2013; Graham-Harrison, 2015). Such carriages are found on long-distance trains, metro services and suburban trains in Mumbai and Kolkata, and there are also a number of 'ladies' specials' – entire trains that are reserved for women – in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata (BBC News, 2009). These women-only spaces are generally very popular with domestic workers, and, indeed, most of the women in my study said that they preferred to travel this way, for the reasons outlined above. Walking with Komula to Bagha Jatin Railway Station one afternoon after she had finished work, for instance, she explained that she always tries to travel in the ladies because in the general compartments 'men are always trying to touch you' (09.10.2015). Namita similarly believed that travelling in the ladies' carriage was best, explaining that, in the ladies' carriage, she does not have to be as concerned with her dress and modesty.

I either get on in the 'ladies' – if it arrives in front of me – or I get on at the back. If the train has already arrived, I just get on wherever I can, but I prefer to use the 'ladies'. You get problems in every part but the 'ladies' is better – it's 'safe'. Sometimes it's very crowded, but it's better because we're all women. We can lift our hands in any way to hold on. In the 'gents', we have to arrange our clothes properly and we often face problems (Namita, 30.11.2015).

The problem with women-only compartments is that there are usually only a few of these in every train – two to every eight general carriages, which, as seen in the account above, are themselves often understood and referred to as 'gents' carriages' (Parichiti & Jagori, 2012: 8; Ghatak, 2014: 257).⁸² This means that women-only compartments are frequently crowded, particularly at peak times – a point which helps to explain why some of my participants sometimes travelled in the general compartments.⁸³ When asked if she used the ladies carriage, Shobna explained that 'It's not always better' and that, even though sometimes women in these carriages help her, letting Bijoy sit on their knee and so on, at other times they push and shove (see also Parichiti, 2015: 37). They also use 'bad language' (*kharap kota*): 'The 'gents' isn't like that, you don't have to hear such language – so in that sense it's better – but then some people [men] have the "habit" [touching/harassing]' (12.12.2015). Travelling home with Mithu one morning after her night shift, she also explained how, around eight o'clock in the morning, the general compartments are usually less crowded than the ladies' carriage which is why she typically uses the former. She used to travel in the ladies' but, like Shobna, disliked the pushing and shoving; she recalled how, one time, she had dropped her glasses and none of the other passengers offered to pick them up. By contrast, Mithu found the passengers in the general compartments (mostly hospital employees in the early morning) to be polite and helpful:

In the 'ladies', they will say they're keeping a place for someone else and move you away. When I used to do morning 'duty' and I used to find that I

⁸² This is in fact one of the main criticisms of women-only carriages/transport – that the creation of women-only spaces means that general spaces become perceived as men's spaces, essentially forcing women to travel in the ones designated for women (Ghatak, 2014: 258). Once, when travelling by metro, a middle-aged man asked Sohini and I to move from a general compartment to a women-only one.

⁸³ There are also problems with the few dedicated women's trains since these typically run too late for many domestic workers to use; the Matribhumi Ladies Special, for instance, begins its journey at eight o'clock in the morning, which is too late for domestic workers who start work in the city before or around seven (Ghatak, 2014: 258).

couldn't get up on the train or was not getting place, some would push me and once someone tried to harm me. We cannot use such slangs that they use. They will be hanging from the door and will not allow you to get up properly. Whereas, here, these people will say, "Look *boudi* is unable to get up, give her some space, help her." In 'ladies' they won't give you space. They will guard and stand. This is deliberate [but] the men say, "*Boudi* sit down, *didi* sit down, you must be having difficulties". By saying this they give me their place to sit and they themselves stand and feel the pressure of the crowd. This train is very crowded, especially from Sonarpur. They will help you. They will also look after you if you fall sick. They have helped me by giving medicines and then getting me down from the train properly and asking me if there was anyone who could take me home (23.09.2015).

Mithu was of course slightly older (45) and therefore less likely to be held to the same standards regarding 'respectability' as younger women, and it is this that likely explains her willingness to travel in the general compartments. In addition, she was arguably more experienced in dealing with unwanted attention from men: 'Suppose a man constantly talks with you as to where are you travelling. I will say, "See you do not have to know everything about my whereabouts." But if I laugh with him, then he will follow me everywhere. Why give them that opportunity? There are women who laugh and are flattered...' (23.09.2015).⁸⁴ However, the fact that Mithu *ideally* preferred to travel in the women-only compartments and indeed did so when going to work in the evening (when the women-only compartments were less full) illustrates that these separate spaces are generally seen as the best and safest option for women.

Women not only appreciate separate carriages but also often feel entitled to them. Indeed, although, as Figure 14 shows, women sometimes tolerate men's presence in women-only compartments (at least to some extent), they at the same time often exhibit a sense of territoriality, as the recent protests associated with the Sealdah-Ranaghat Matribhumi Ladies Special illustrate. One of a handful of women-only trains launched in 2010 by Mamata Banerjee (the then railway minister and now chief minister of West Bengal), the Special seldom ran at full occupancy and so the government decided to convert three of the train's nine carriages into general compartments, allowing men to board (Gupta, 2015). This decision ran into opposition

⁸⁴ As Mithu insinuates, persisting ideas about women's 'honour' and 'respectability' mean that those who are seen to lack these virtues (i.e. those who behave or dress 'inappropriately') are frequently perceived – by men and women both – as 'deserving' of sexual harassment and violence. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 7.

from women passengers, who, in August 2015, took matters into their own hands at Khardah Station by dragging men passengers from the train and squatting on the tracks, actions which in turn compelled Banerjee to go back on her decision and declare that the train would once again be a women-only space (Gupta, 2015).⁸⁵ Similarly, a few months after these protests, in November 2015, a man died after falling from one of the other Matribhumi Ladies Specials, with reports suggesting that the man, who had been arguing with women passengers and a woman constable of the Railway Protection Force shortly after boarding the train, may have been pushed onto the tracks (Gupta & Dasgupta, 2015).



Figure 14. A man travels in the ladies' carriage. Photo by Madhabi, 2015 (reproduced with permission).

No Time to Think, No Time to Rest

The various accounts mentioned here point to a common thread in women's experiences – a constant lack of time and a constant struggle to be on time. Time intensification and rushing is, as noted in Chapter 2, now a major theme in sociological research on work-life balance, with scholars highlighting how, globally, more and more people – particularly women – are experiencing a 'time squeeze' (Hochschild, 2001; Southerton, 2003; Wajcman, 2008; Rosa, 2013). This 'acceleration' is explained in terms of increases in combined work commitments of family members

⁸⁵ It is unclear how many (if any) of the protestors were domestic workers since, according to Parichiti, the domestic workers in their network did not understand the protestors' outrage and condemned the violence; they also highlighted that this train is mainly used by formal sector workers, which might explain why, following the protests, the government decided to reconsider their decision (personal correspondence, 09.10.2015).

(Wajcman, 2008: 64), but also in terms of the proliferation of technology and an increasing emphasis on 'efficiency' which has meant that 'activities and tasks occur – and are expected to occur – faster and with less “down” time' (Strazdins *et al.*, 2016: 22). The literature shows how people rush through tasks or do them simultaneously, striving to keep pace or free up time (Southerton, 2003), rushing being especially acute for working mothers who must juggle work with caregiving (Strazdins *et al.*, 2016: 23; see also Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Wajcman, 2008: 64). Domestic workers who combine work in several different households (including their own) and who commute significant distances to get to work are arguably among the most pressed for time. Indeed, the women in my study frequently worked long, fourteen- and fifteen-hour days, juggling several different jobs and then combining this paid work in the city with their unpaid work at home. Moreover, as we will also see in the next chapter, because of the changes in the organisation of domestic work, employers often wish to maximise the time commuters and other live-out workers spend in their homes, giving workers heavy workloads and expecting them to rush through tasks, with few or no periods of rest (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 101-102; see also Goldstein, 2003: 62). Workers themselves rush, hurrying through tasks and from house to house, to keep on track or win back time. They rush so that a) they will not be late for their (next) employer, and thus scolded or dismissed and b) they will not miss their train and be late home, women's concerns about the latter being linked not only to their *own* heavy burden of domestic labour but also to ideas about women's 'honour'. They are, in short, constantly rushing: 'I'm so busy with work that there's no time to think. I'm literally going into one house, working, and then going to another. After finishing work, I have to rush to get back home. There's no time' (Chitra, 12.07.2015).

While train delays may mean a moment of rest for commuters – that is, if they are not accosted by police or others for 'loitering' – this rest is fleeting and often spoiled by thoughts about the work that has yet to be done, whether it be in employers' or women's own homes. Indeed, when I asked Ranjani (early thirties), a domestic worker whom I met on the platform one afternoon at Dhakuria station, what she thinks about while she waits for her train home every day, she said: 'What do I think about? What will we eat, what fish will I buy? I also think about money' (13.05.2015). Once on the train, the mad rush starts again. Madhabi's earlier quote – 'life or death, anything can happen and there's no end to it' – speaks to the dangers of commuting but also to the

ceaseless pace of commuters' lives as they rush to and from the city, between employers' homes, and through tasks in both employers' and their own homes. As noted in chapter 4, there is a general understanding among employers and workers that the norm is for workers to take four days off each month, but, as we will see in the next chapter, in practice, workers' attempts to take leave often lead to disagreements between workers and employers, these disagreements sometimes also leading to termination of employment for the worker. Workers may get a few days off to celebrate and rest at Puja, and then there is the odd social event – a family wedding or NGO activity if they belong to such networks – but, apart from this, workers have very little opportunity to rest and recuperate.

The frantic pace of women's lives and the lack of opportunity for proper rest is arguably what makes (rare) opportunities to rest and relax, such as those organised by Parichiti, so valuable. During my period of fieldwork, I attended two of Parichiti's social events – two picnics which cost domestic workers Rs.30 or so to attend and which were very popular, each being attended by around a hundred women. In between some more formal activities, women enjoyed meals together, as well as some free time, using this time to chat, stroll around, and pose for photographs (see Figure 15). At the 2015 picnic, women also set up a makeshift dancefloor using a piece of tarpaulin; and, in 2016, as noted in Chapter 3, Madhabi, Basudha and I displayed some of the photos Madhabi had taken as part of a photo-voice project (see Figure 3). Dulu, one of the attendees at the most recent picnic summarised why so many women wanted to attend these events: 'We are enjoying this. We work hard every day – no one gives us happiness. We don't get to go anywhere throughout the year. If for one day we get to relax, what's wrong with that?' (10.02.2016). Her friend Jamuna said the same: 'We've enjoyed very much. We don't usually get to enjoy ourselves for the whole day like this' (10.02.2016). These events, and indeed the journey to and from these events, also offered women the chance to let loose and temporarily break with the strict gender norms that governed their daily lives. On the makeshift tarpaulin dancefloor and in the aisles of the bus, they behaved and danced in a way that was hard to imagine them doing elsewhere, daring one another to copy their increasingly risqué moves and whooping at nearby men each time the bus stopped to wait at traffic lights.



Figure 15. Domestic workers enjoying a meal together at the Parichiti picnic. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2016.

These opportunities to relax and socialise are, however, rare; most of the time, women are rushing about, juggling competing demands on their time and labour. Day after day, and year after year, this combination of hard, physical labour and commuting takes a serious toll on women's physical and mental health, which is why those doing it tend to be younger (on the links between rushing and health, see Strazdins *et al.*, 2016). Most of my participants were in their twenties, thirties, and forties – just two women, Charu and Fatema, were aged fifty and above – indicating that those who can give up commuting after a certain point, do so. Chandra (48) used to work in two houses near Dhakuria station doing *thike kaaj*, but when I met her she worked in just one house in the Sonarpur area (a 20-minute or so walk from her village). She explained that the commute became more difficult with age, and that her husband encouraged her to look for work locally, even if this meant working fewer hours and earning less money as a result. 'It was painful for me to go and come back by train. There are so many people and I had to hold on to the bars to steady myself. My husband said to me, "You don't have to work there. Look for something in Sonarpur"' (04.05.2015). Chandra could manage on her reduced wage of Rs.400 per month since her husband was also earning (he supplied nearby houses with drinking water) and her children were grown up; however, other women like Charu had no choice but to keep commuting. Charu not only had one of the longest and most difficult commutes I came across during fieldwork; at 52, she was also the oldest woman I knew who commuted to the city for domestic work. Given the distance she travelled and her age, the daily journey was, for her, utterly backbreaking:

It's exhausting. Taking the train every day is painful. It's crowded and you have to stand. I have 'low pressure' [blood pressure] and when my 'pressure' fails, I can't eat anything. I can't sleep, my body aches terribly. I have to go and do the 'journey' though. I have to do it. If I don't, I won't be able to keep going. I have to feed myself and my family. Whatever my age is, I will keep going (Charu, 16.05.2015).

As Charu explains here, even though she struggled to cope with the daily journey to and from the city and she had also developed health problems in recent years, she had to keep going. She was the primary earner in her family and she also had debts to pay; in addition, unlike Chandra and others, she and her husband did not own their home, something which in turn caused her a great deal of worry.

For my children, I want them to have security, but what can I do? I have given everything for my daughters' marriages and still I am struggling to pay my debts. What else can I do? I can't do everything for them. Whatever I earn, I spend. I wish I could give my sons money, for a house, but I can't. I've also got to get my youngest son married. I don't have a permanent place either – I worry about all of this. I'm worried about what will happen in the future, but what can I do? (Charu, 16.05.2015).

Fatema (50) similarly worried about the future and how her body would fare as it became frailer. An employer had once offered Fatema help finding a room in Kolkata after she and her family decided to move abroad, but Fatema had refused the offer, explaining to her employer that she did not want to be separated from her children, who were young at the time.⁸⁶ Now that she is older and her children are grown-up, however, Fatema says she would accept such an offer: 'I want to relax a bit [...] I'm older now' (26.07.2015).

Commuting over the course of several decades, women are also arguably more likely to suffer injuries and accidents, and develop serious health concerns, both of which again add to the difficulty of commuting and often lead to burnout. Mithu suffered terrible head pain after being involved in a traffic accident, and Charu, as already mentioned, had low blood pressure; many others also took vitamins and supplements – spending the little money they had on these, which, they explained, helped to boost

⁸⁶ This employer had been preparing to move abroad and was, according to Fatema, worried about Fatema's wellbeing. Fatema seemed to suggest that she would not have been able to bring her children with her to this room (perhaps because this room would have been in an employer's home).

their health and energy levels and get them through the day. These women's accounts of commuting were, unsurprisingly, the most distressing, and of them Anjali's was particularly difficult to take in.

Lauren: What is the journey to work like?

Anjali: Sometimes I feel pain and sometimes I'm weak. Most of the time I face problems. When I feel [like this], I pray to God and say, "how will I manage?" [...] If I don't have this supplement, I'll die. I'm suffering. After returning sometimes I just lay down and turn on the fan. I don't have the energy to get up and take a bath. Sometimes I can't pull my body up, but what else can I do? Will I steal or rob people? I have to work. If I don't work, who will feed me?

Lauren: When your health is really not good, what do you do? Do you ever stay home?

Anjali: Yes, sometimes I don't go to work. Sometimes I also take an auto instead of walking. I ask God, "Will I be able to reach my house?" What else can I do? Sometimes I cry when I come back. I feel so numb and my body cannot bear any more. But if I don't go to work I will starve. Today I came back at 2pm – I've not yet washed my clothes. I can't do heavy work like washing clothes anymore, or grinding spices. If I stumble, it hurts here [holds side of body]. Sometimes it hurts so much, I think I'll die. Sometimes on the train, I ask others to give me their seat and they often do. A few times I have been pushed on the train and it hurt so much. In the morning, there's a big crowd and people push a lot. It's extremely painful for me [...] One day it was very bad after work. That day I fainted on the train. People helped me – they gave me some water and told me to sit down and they helped me get down at Sonarpur. Do you know of any such 'patient' like me who can work like this? [...] As long as I can work, I'll continue like this, but I don't think I'll be able to work for much longer. My body is not giving (*amar shorir diche na*). (22.04.2015).

It was devastating to hear Anjali talk in such detail about the pain and suffering (*koshto*) she endured as a result of having to commute, and indeed it was difficult to know how to respond when she posed time and again the question commuters often ask when speaking about their work and lives: *ki korbo?* (what will I do?' or 'what else can I do?'). Given her serious health concerns and difficult financial situation, Anjali was clearly in dire straits when we met and knew her, and we were (as we had been that afternoon in Mithu's house) highly aware that in agreeing to talk to us, she had perhaps hoped for something more than a listening ear. It has also been difficult to write about this conversation and Anjali's experience, this being made more difficult by the fact I could not, as noted earlier, follow-up with Anjali after this visit to see if she was okay. I thus do not know what became of her, though it can perhaps be

assumed that she was forced to continue much in the same way, albeit in a new place, until she no longer could.

Stepping back slightly, Anjali's account, along with those of others, can be understood as illustrating the earlier and broader point about commuting – that, for many of those doing this, it is less a complex mobility strategy linked to land, property, and a better kind of life for themselves and their families, but rather a matter of survival, something they do 'for the stomach' (*peth'er jonno*), and often at serious cost to their health and wellbeing. In Anjali's case, the experience of having to commute, and of having to keep commuting day-in, day-out, *and* whilst battling cancer, very clearly amounts to a form of structural or everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Kleinman, 2000; Das, 2007); and, although, like others she sometimes spoke about her hope for her daughter to become educated and lead a good life, she could not as others could pour *all* her hope and energy into this imagined future, which remained, for the most part, unattainable if not deeply frightening – the very real possibility of her body giving out (and what would then happen to her and her daughter if it *did*) weighed heavily on her mind. Like Rickey, the focus of Loïc J. D. Wacquant's study of a Chicago ghetto (1999: 156), who similarly grappled with conditions of extreme insecurity, it was all Anjali could do to focus on the day-to-day, on getting through, on surviving.

Under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity, where existence becomes reduced to the craft of day-to-day survival and where one must continually do as best as one can with whatever is at hand, that is, precious little, the present becomes so uncertain that it devours the future and prohibits thinking about it except as fantasy... in its own way, a *labor of social mourning* that does not say its name.

We also see in Anjali's account, however, a remarkable degree of pragmatism *in the face of* precarity, the question '*ki korbo?*' signalling both this pragmatism and a sense of hopelessness. As others did, she made everyday bargains to make her day-to-day life more bearable, taking autos instead of walking, or taking a day off from work to rest at home, and subsequently enduring the costs (having less money to spend on food and other necessities, or being scolded by employers). Indeed, while she at times presented herself as machine-like and indefatigable, asking here 'do you know

of any such 'patient' like me who can work like this?'⁸⁷ – she also insisted, as we shall see in Chapter 6, on the 'human' need to rest. Anjali, like others, had a keen sense of the tangible reality of her body, her tired, ailing body becoming in her account 'a symbol of class and gender oppressions' (Roy, 2003: 193-194); and, like others, she rejected the pressure from employers for continuous, uninterrupted service, demanding time off and sometimes getting into arguments with employers about leave, even though this carried a significant risk in terms of dismissal.

Commuting as a Space of Resistance

While the commute is often time-consuming, arduous, and sometimes dangerous for workers, it can, at the same time, offer certain possibilities and opportunities. These do not outweigh the challenges described above – as noted, the overriding narrative is one of suffering – but rather enable workers to better endure the commute and, as we shall see later, possibly help them bargain for better conditions of work. The first of these opportunities is that the commute can provide a time-out for women, a valuable break in between their work in the city and at home. Women can, and often do, use this time to relax and unwind, particularly if they finish work earlier in the day and are able to board less crowded trains.

Sohini and I went to see Madhabi yesterday. It was a beautiful day – sunny and crisp – and we arrived early at the station, around one o'clock. It wasn't very busy on the platform and when the train arrived, we climbed up into the ladies' carriage with the ten or so other women who were waiting, finding seats together on one of the long benches. A couple of stops later, a pair of women stood up to get off and we shuffled up to the window, watching as the lush scenery whizzed past and feeling the warm winter sun on our faces. A couple of hawkers wandered up and down the aisle, exhibiting their wares – *shakha-pola* bangles, digestives, and small plastic tubs labelled 'hand balm'. Everyone was wrapped up in woollen shawls and it was quiet aside from the rattle of the train; some of the women on the other side of the carriage were

⁸⁷ This trope, or 'capability narrative', was reproduced and reinforced by other workers too, through statements such as 'we can do all of this, we're used to it, but you can't'; and, as Roy notes, it is similarly reproduced and reinforced by Kolkata's journalists who describe commuter women 'as barely human, the "automatic washing machines" of the city, strange fusions of woman and machine' (2003: 193). Such ideas about workers' capabilities and strength arguably enable workers to keep going, but they at the same time justify their heavy workloads and exploitation (Roy, 2003: 193-194).

chatting together quietly, while others were dozing, their heads lolling and rocking with the motion of the carriage (field notes, 26.01.2016).

Like the atmosphere on the buses to and from the Parichiti picnics, the atmosphere in the ladies' carriage can also be quite lively at times, which again offers a slightly different kind of respite for commuters. Indeed, this is a place where jokes and stories and snacks are exchanged, where mobile phones buzz and ring, where babies are passed around and cooed over, and where recent purchases are inspected and discussed in detail. On one particularly memorable journey, Basudha and I were making our way back from Madhabi's house with Madhabi's friend, Durga, and the entire carriage broke out into song. There was not much room in the carriage and I was perched on Durga's lap; Durga was clapping her hands in front of me and another woman next to us was keeping the rhythm with a small set of hand cymbals. Most of these women, Durga later explained, were on their way to work in the city; they were *ayahs*, like her, and they worked twelve hours each evening caring for 'patients'. I later found out that these were devotional songs (*kirtan*), sung in praise of Radha and Krishna (Hindu deities) – something which speaks to the connection between singing and solidarity as well as the wider literature on kindness and support in everyday public spaces (Brownlie & Anderson, 2017).

As these few examples indicate, the commute – and in particular the ladies' carriage – can function as a space of (relative and intermittent) freedom for women. Women are, as noted earlier, generally less concerned with modesty and 'respectability' in the ladies' carriage; there is no issue if, for instance, their bra strap is showing or they need to feed their baby. When I asked Madhabi about one of the photographs she had taken as part of a photo-voice project, a photograph showing a woman breastfeeding a baby, she explained: 'We were travelling together and the boy was crying, he was hungry but, in the crowd, she couldn't feed him. We didn't know her but we said to her that we'd stand around her if she wanted to sit down and feed him. "Feed him," we said. "We are all women here. What's there to be embarrassed about?"' Women can also talk more freely in the ladies' carriage than they can elsewhere. Roy notes how commuter women offer sharp critiques of their employers, husbands, and sons, often describing them as *babus* – a term which is used to politely address or refer to middle-

class men but which can also connote lazy, pleasure-loving urbanites (2003: 193).⁸⁸ Ray and Qayum also describe how commuter women joke about their husbands dying and ridding themselves of the burden of providing for failed patriarchs (2010: 143). During one of the journeys undertaken by Ray and Qayum, a middle-class woman in fact became offended by the other commuters' 'foul' language, turning to Ray and Qayum and explaining that these other women were 'uncivilised' (*asabhya*) (2010: 143).⁸⁹

Although I do not recall overhearing such remarks and jokes on trains, women *were* critical of their husbands in other spaces of the commute. Walking to and from the station near to Madhabi's village, for instance, Madhabi would frequently complain about her husband (from whom she was estranged) and son, often because the former had failed to provide financial support or because the latter had succumbed to pressure from neighbours and tried to punish his mother for her 'wayward' behaviour – a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7. Moreover, like the well-known physician mentioned by Ray and Qayum – who considered commuters to be 'dirty' and 'foul-mouthed' and who cast aspersions about their morality (2010: 143-144) – I also frequently received warnings from middle-class acquaintances in the city when the subject of my research came up in conversation. These acquaintances would typically express surprise about my ability and willingness to travel on commuter trains, before instructing me to be careful and similarly insinuating something negative about not only the safety of the trains but also the behaviour and character of those travelling on them. Such ideas about commuters, as a dirty, dangerous rabble, reflect wider, historical ideas about the suburbs as places of vice and moral decay (Gately, 2014: 52-53). Moreover, in the Indian context, they are linked to fears about terrorism, violence, and crime (Falzon, 2004; Gooptu 2013) – fears, which, as we shall see in the next chapter, have contributed to widespread

⁸⁸ The concept of the '*babu*', as Roy notes, has deep roots in the cultural politics of West Bengal and is 'double loaded in its gendered meanings' (2003: 193). 'On the one hand, it refers to the middle class as male, situating class oppressions within a larger structure of patriarchy and thereby merging hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. On the other hand, it constitutes elite and poor men as effeminate and weak, incapable of being manly, thereby unsettling both sets of masculinities' (Roy, 2003: 193).

⁸⁹ Evidence from NGOs similarly indicates that domestic workers are often looked down upon and treated with contempt by other commuters who complain about them travelling without tickets, using bad language, and occupying too much space (Parichiti & Jagori, 2012: 10; Ghatak, 2014: 258).

security practices and increasing surveillance of domestic workers in employers' homes. According to Gooptu, this preoccupation is particularly prominent among India's urban-based upper and middle classes,

not only due to rising political violence, the increasing strength of the Maoist Naxalite movement, and the fear of terrorism, but also on account of an accentuated perception of political threat from below, verging on "demophobia", in the context of the growing mass democratic mobilization of the poor and lower castes since the 1990s (2013: 16).

In addition to offering women a space and opportunity to relax and socialise, the time spent waiting in stations or in transit can also lead to important friendships and relationships, which in turn provide women with a form of support. Madhabi was something of an outsider in her village but she had many friends and acquaintances outside of this context; indeed, I often found her chatting with women on the platform at Dhakuria station and when coming back to Kolkata from her village, she would place us in the care of one of these friends, most of whom, she told us, she had first met through commuting. One such woman was Kabita, and, as we will see in the next chapter, Madhabi and Kabita supported one another through various personal difficulties, often talking on the phone or visiting each other at home. Other women similarly explained how, through making their daily journey to the city, they had come to know others: 'Going and coming, we meet friends. If we see a familiar face, we chat' (Shushma, 13.06.2015). Such relationships – and opportunities to build such relationships – are important since women do not often know other workers in employers' buildings and neighbourhoods, and they also sometimes do not know their neighbours either. In much rarer cases, women also develop romantic relationships on the commute, the relative anonymity and temporary suspension of time afforded by commuting offering women an opportunity to flout – at least to some degree and for a time – traditional gender norms. As we shall see in Chapter 7, however, such relationships can bring serious repercussions for women who must continually perform respectability and guard against a culture of suspicion in their homes and communities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the relationships and networks women build through commuting can have important implications in terms of women's political mobilisation. As seen earlier with the example of women singing, there is a strong

sense of solidarity in the ladies' carriage, and particularly among those who are commuting to the city for domestic work. When talking about commuting, women frequently use collective pronouns (as they do when referring to their working lives more generally) – 'our pain' (*aamader betha*) and so on – and women also come together to engage in direct and collective forms of action; the earlier examples of ticketless travel and the protests surrounding the Matribhumi Ladies' Special testify to this (also see Roy, 2003: 194). Moreover, through commuting women find about each other's pay and working conditions, using this information to leverage for better pay and conditions for themselves). Indeed, just as the public buses were meeting places for the commuting workers in Erman and Kara's study, as a space to discuss wages and working conditions and 'pool' employer contacts (2018: 48), for my participants, it was the ladies' carriage, as well as the other spaces of women's commutes – train stations, auto stands, the walk to and from the station – where such conversations took place. 'While walking we talk. I ask where they've been working, what their employers have given them to eat. I also ask about their children – what their children are studying. What kind of conversation happens? How are your children? Who gets how much money?' (Anjali, 22.04.2015).⁹⁰ In this way, then, the commute becomes 'productive' time (Lyons & Urry, 2005; Jain & Lyons, 2008), the ladies' carriage and other spaces of the commute functioning both as sites of oppression and marginality *and* as sites of resistance and mobilisation for workers (see also hooks, 1990).

Recognising that the commute has much potential in terms of domestic worker mobilisation, Parichiti, one of the first NGOs to raise awareness of the issues faced by domestic workers in Kolkata and one of few NGOs working with commuting domestic workers in India, has been working with women domestic workers on the commute for many years. On a weekly basis, Parichiti staff visit the platforms at Dhakuria and Bagha Jatin, holding informal meetings with domestic workers and passing on information about Parichiti's services. As noted in Chapter 4, staff also provide support to those experiencing violence at work and at home, advocating on the behalf of workers and helping to arrange legal support and police assistance

⁹⁰ Wider sociological research on friendship indicates that help and advice often plays a bigger part in working-class friendships than intimacy, suggesting that people with fewer resources are more often drawn into relationships of necessity (Jamieson, 1998: 89).

where necessary (Parichiti, 2015: 2-4; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 173-174). ‘If I’m having trouble at work, I can call Parichiti and take them with me to talk to them [employers]. They can speak to the *bhadramahila* and say, “They’ve been working in your house for a long time.” Parichiti is there to help us in need’ (Supriya, 25.11.2015).⁹¹ Those in Parichiti’s networks also actively assist other categories of workers – live-in and young girl workers, who are, as noted earlier, particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 263); and in one, albeit unusual case, a domestic worker brought her employer, who was herself experiencing domestic violence, to Parichiti – something which demonstrates the possibility of political connections among women despite differences of class/caste (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 259). A major strand in Parichiti’s work and activism has, as noted earlier, been around questions of violence, and domestic workers in their network are often invited to take part in events and rallies organised by affiliated groups and organisations, this too being a key part of Parichiti’s wider work of mobilising domestic workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 260-261).

Similarly, at Parichiti social events, including the picnics described earlier, workers are invited to participate in more formal, politically-oriented activities, which are, again, in keeping with Parichiti’s broader aim of worker mobilisation. At the 2016 picnic, the main activity was role-play, which was not only a great deal of fun for those taking part, but also dealt with some important issues including difficult employers, sexual harassment, and domestic violence (see Figures 16 & 17).

⁹¹ It is possible that my position as someone loosely affiliated with Parichiti affected participants’ responses in relation to questions about Parichiti and its work, encouraging them to be more positive.



Figure 16. Organising groups for the role-play activity at the Parichiti picnic. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2016.



Figure 17. Role-play activity at the Parichiti picnic. Photo by Lauren Wilks, 2016.

After our snack (*luchi aloo*), staff and volunteers – including myself – set about organising the group into teams ready for the main activity. I didn't know what had been planned exactly, only that we were going to do role-play, which sounded a lot more fun than simply discussing topics (which is what had happened last year). It took a bit of time to get organised but once we were ready, we went off in our groups with the card we'd been given – which had written on it a scenario to which we had to respond theatrically. It was hot and so we headed straight for one of the tables with the large umbrellas and, once sat down, we appointed Santi as team leader. She and others seemed happy with this decision and she proceeded immediately to read the card out loud, explaining our group's scenario which was basically about a boy who had been caught harassing girls in his village. The group decided that we should have an angry mother, who would run around trying to beat the boy with some branches, represented by a rolled-up piece of paper. There was also the boy himself, of course, and some insalubrious friends who would lead the boy astray. One of the livelier characters in the group (who'd been leading the dancing on the bus) volunteered for the role of the boy, picking up my

backpack and running around as another woman, playing the role of the angry mother, chased 'him'. Our play was, in the end, a lot shorter and more jovial than the others, but it got plenty of laughs when we performed it for the larger group. Interestingly, the group decided that the only way to stop the boy from misbehaving was to get him married – a decision that was enacted at the end of the play and which was afterwards questioned by Parichiti staff. There were similarly important discussions after some of the other plays too – on women's relationships with employers and husbands and so on (field notes, 11.02.2016).

As indicated here, these activities encouraged the women to question taken-for-granted norms and attitudes, and they also helped to build their confidence – as women and workers. Much of Parichiti's work is indeed centered on building workers' confidence and at the picnics as well as other such events, workers are frequently asked by staff to chant slogans which encourage them to see themselves as workers and demand rights on the basis of this identity:

Amra khete khai, shromiker odhikar chai (We work hard to earn our bread, we demand recognition as workers).

Amra khati protidin, chhuti chai chardin (We work hard every day, we need four days of leave).

Meyeder ki proyojon? Sara bochor uparjon (What do women need? They need paid work all through the year).

Ek hoyechhi meyer dol, korbo ebar din bodol (We women have come together and will now change the world).⁹²

Domestic workers do not, in general, identify as 'workers' (*grihasrameek*) – something which may be due to the continuing association between the concept of workers' rights, working-class political militancy, and trade unionism (Gooptu, 2009: 53). Similarly, they are in many cases reluctant to discuss their work and working identities – arguably because of the caste/class connotations of paid domestic work. Asking domestic workers at the picnic to chant this slogan, and to embrace this overtly-political identity, was, then, arguably part of Parichiti's broader work of providing the space and opportunity for workers to mobilise and stand up for their rights, which appears to be having some effect:

We've all come today and it's great. These *didis* come to our neighbourhoods and they go to other places but we don't usually get to meet the people they visit. We don't realise how many people there are in Parichiti. But we have

⁹² Personal correspondence, July 2018.

come here together and can see how big a group we are. So we know the struggle that we have started, we can keep [it] going (Anita, 10.02.2016).

This degree of mobilisation, on and through the commute, is important since, as we saw in Chapter 4, there has not yet been any serious attempt to organise domestic workers in Kolkata/West Bengal and, with the exception of those villages that are visited by Parichiti staff (and where domestic workers have come together to form local 'solution groups'), there is also often a lack of occupational community and identity in the villages and peri-urban areas where commuters live, as well as in the urban, informal settlements where other live-out workers live (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 120). Indeed, the degree of turnover in some commuters' villages means that they often do not know their neighbours (or know them well), and thus what work they are doing, what they are getting paid and so on. As we shall see in the next chapter, opportunities for cooperation in the workplace are similarly limited, this too underscoring the importance of networks and solidarities forged on the commute.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the experience of commuting, detailing the challenges, as well as the possibilities and opportunities associated with women's journeys to and from the city. As we have seen, the commute is expensive, time-consuming, arduous, and sometimes dangerous for workers. In the summer and rainy months, many of the existing issues to do with poor infrastructure and overcrowding are exacerbated, making conditions yet more challenging and perilous; however, year-round, commuters face problems – in relation to toilet access, safety, and overcrowding. Moreover, rather than offering workers the 'gift' of time (see, for instance, Jain & Lyons, 2008), commuting in many cases contributes to severe time pressure for workers. They rush, as we have seen, to and from the city, between employers' homes, and through tasks in both employers' and their own homes; and, despite their best efforts to be on time, they are still often late, for employers' homes and their own homes – a topic that is discussed in greater detail in the next two chapters. Additionally, commuting takes a serious toll on workers' health and bodies, becoming increasingly difficult with age. Anjali's experience, as we have seen, was particularly difficult and her account of travelling to the city each day was truly heart-breaking to hear. For her and other women in similar positions, commuting has little to do with

land and property or the ability to lead a better life away from the city: it is simply a matter of survival, of gritting their teeth, and getting on, day-by-day, week-by-week, for as long as they can. Indeed, in Anjali's cases, the imperative of having to make the daily journey to the city, day-in, day-out, while also battling cancer very clearly amounts to a form of structural or everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Kleinman, 2000; Das, 2007). Having said this, I have also shown that commuting offers certain possibilities and opportunities; these possibilities and opportunities do not outweigh the challenges described above – and certainly not for women like Anjali – but rather enable workers to better cope with the burden of commuting, and, in future, may also help them to bargain for better conditions of work, leading to real, positive change. This opportunity and space for mobilisation is particularly important since, as we will see in the next chapter, opportunities for collective action in the workplace, or indeed, cooperation of any sort, are often extremely limited.

Chapter Six: Managing Work & Employers

In the previous chapter, we saw how workers experience the commute and how they rush from one place to another, struggling to be on time for both employers' and their own homes. This chapter extends the discussion on commuting and rushing, looking at how workers manage their work within the broader context of commuting, and how commuting affects workers' relationships with employers. In doing so, it addresses the research question, *What are commuters' relationships with employers like, and how does the commute affect their relationships with employers?* While supporting Ray and Qayum's arguments about the continuing significance of the familial ideal (which continues to be reflected in workers' accounts of the 'good' employer), I show that commuters, like city-dwelling domestic workers, are highly pragmatic about work and employers, their accounts speaking closely to Sen and Sengupta's theory of 'pragmatic intimacy' (2016) and Ozyegin's (2001:142-144) concept of 'intimacy work'. Commuters actively seek out and maintain trusting, familial-like relationships with employers, valuing the important non-wage benefits and the degree of protection and dignity that these relationships sometimes bring. As noted earlier, workers lack formal rights and protections and are often subject to (caste/class-based) avoidance behaviour and monitoring in employers' homes; they are also often rushed by employers, who expect them to carry out their work quickly and mechanically, or else treated with contempt (*ghrinalghenna*) and indignity. Workers particularly resent being treated as *kaajer lok* – a term literally meaning 'working people' and which is often perceived as derogatory. The first half of this chapter discusses these various themes, explaining workers' preference for close, familial-like relationships (in a broader context of insecurity and indignity), while the second half discusses why, despite widespread dissatisfaction with employers and jobs, commuters often decide to stay in these jobs and 'adjust'. The decision to leave a particular job is complicated for certain groups of commuters; however, job security is a key concern for commuters generally due to the intense competition for jobs and the high rate of turnover in the neighbourhoods where they work. While moving beyond the 'servitude' framework, then, and recognising the autonomy and agency of commuting workers, I draw attention to the particular constraints that limit commuters' bargaining power and ability to leave – something which is touched upon in Sen and Sengupta's study but

not discussed in detail. These constraints do not, I argue, stem from feudal codes and structures connected to the city's colonial past (as Ray and Qayum argue, and as is arguably more the case with live-in workers), but are rather connected to more recent challenges brought about by the changing organisation of domestic work in India – namely high turnover and job insecurity.

The Good Employer: 'Love', Care, and Non-Wage Benefits

Like the city-dwelling live-out workers in Sen and Sengupta's study, the commuters in my study typically describe their work in terms of *kaaj* – *barir kaaj* (housework), *rannar kaaj* (cooking work), *thike kaaj* (cleaning/part-time/temporary work) – rejecting servant imagery and emphasising their autonomy through statements such as 'I do *rannar kaaj*'. They are, furthermore, sometimes quite positive about the more transactional relationships they share with employers. Chitra (45), for instance, spoke about how she appreciated being able to leave her employers' homes at the end of the day and the degree of emotional separation entailed in more transactional, part-time/live-out work. 'When I go to work, I do all the things I'm meant to – cleaning, cooking, washing-up. I can finish my work, change and then leave. I don't have to worry about who's going to come to the house after I leave, what needs to be done in the evening' (Chitra, 12.07.2015). Santi (26) was similarly grateful for the element of separation and distance that commuting and transactional work relationships afforded, replying, when I asked her how she felt about her work and relationships with employers, 'now I'm fine' (25.11.2015). Like many other commuters, Santi had started working as a young girl, for many years living *with* employers, and it was arguably this experience that gave her a more positive outlook on her commuting. In addition, commuters generally prefer to receive a cash bonus, rather than clothing, for Puja – something which, again, may be read as an indication of their appreciation of (at least some aspects of) more transactional employment relationships.

Although workers describe their work in terms of *kaaj* and sometimes highlight the benefits of more transactional relationships with employers, they at the same time reject the label of *kaajer lok*, resenting employers who treat them as wage labourers rather than people. Chitra, for instance, sought 'a few good words' from her

employers, even though she only spent short periods in their homes each day: 'I just want them to talk to me properly. I don't need them to be very nice. Just because they're giving me money, doesn't mean they can treat me badly' (12.07.2015). Malika (mid-forties) similarly resented the fact that her employers were standoffish, stating: 'They don't care about us. They only have a relationship with your work' (19.07.2015). Commuters are not only *aware* of their outsider status (also see Dill, 1980; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1988: 325-326), but also deeply resentful of employers' lack of effort to reduce this social distance and to evidence their claims of familiarity with tangible expressions of care. Indeed, in cases where employers do not do this, workers often view employers' claims to familiarity and affection as hollow or else 'a ruse to make them work harder' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 25). 'Does an outsider ever become one's own (*por konodin apon hoy*)? I do good work, that's why they like me. They love my work. If I were to leave this job, they wouldn't recognise me on the street. As long as I work, they'll love me' (Ranjani, 13.05.2015).

Commuters also value close, familial-like and reciprocal relationships with employers. These are usually long-standing relationships (spanning several years or decades), where workers have been able to establish a degree of trust with employers and where workers receive, in return for their loyalty and labour, important non-wage benefits. These benefits are, as Sen and Sengupta note, important in themselves – particularly given the continuing lack of formal rights and protections for workers – but also because they lend a measure of dignity and humanity to work that is otherwise perceived and experienced as denigrating (2016: 176). Because of the increasingly high degree of turnover, close, familial-like relationships with employers are, however, increasingly rare – something which, again, makes them valuable to workers. Madhumita (34) explained that in two houses where she worked as a cook, she was expected to go about her work swiftly and silently – as if she had 'sellotape' on her lips – but in the third, her employers, a *bhadralok* couple in their sixties, treated her and her daughters 'like family' (*ekdom poribar'r moton*).⁹³

In that house, it's completely like home for me (*ekta barite, amar puro barir moto*). They love them [her daughters] a lot. You'll probably laugh but this

⁹³ Variations of the phrase 'like family' were used time and again by workers. They are also, as Ray and Qayum note, a constant refrain in employer narratives – both in India and around the world – with employers using such phrases to evoke the quality of the relationship with domestic workers (2010: 96; see also Young, 1987).

man is quite old so I call him *meshomoshai*.⁹⁴ He is just like a friend of mine. I also call him *hero-babu*. He also doesn't call me Madhumita. You see our relationship is a bit different [short pause, Madhumita smiles]. I talk with *mashi-ma*, but I talk and share everything with him, like if I had a fight with my husband, or if they [her daughters] got poor marks in their exams (Madhumita, 02.06.2015).

Madhumita attributed the close relationship she shared with this couple to the support she had provided years earlier when their son – the man whose photograph stood on top of Madhumita's fridge – had died. Reaching for the photograph, she explained how she had helped care for them during this personally difficult time, going beyond her usual role (cooking) and taking care of them as she did her own parents.

I gave them all the love and care that I could [...] That man, he lost his mind. I used to stay all day and take care of them, taking them to the doctors, doing medical tests. I was there with them all throughout it all. They saw how much I did for them [...] The way I look after my parents, I looked after them like that. I don't have much money to help them financially but what I could do in all my limits is give them the love and care which I developed while working for them. In return for that, they help my daughters (Madhumita, 02.06.2015).

Madhumita's account reads, quite clearly, as an example of what Ray and Qayum write about in relation to the 'rhetoric of love': she uses kinship terms to address her employers and there are various examples of love, loyalty and generosity – 'stock characteristics that family members are meant to possess or display' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 96). There also appeared to be at the heart of this relationship an understanding of the importance of reciprocity, based on mutual trust, much like in family relationships.⁹⁵ As she indicates here and as she clarified later in our conversation, this couple not only took a genuine interest in her wellbeing and happiness, listening to her offload her troubles or speak about whatever was on her mind, they also understood when she had to take time off for her children and indeed provided an extra Rs.1,000 each month for her daughters' education – additional financial support which Madhumita valued greatly. All of this, then, made Madhumita feel valued and 'loved' and, importantly, less like the wage labourer she was made to feel like in other employers' homes.

⁹⁴ The term '*meshomoshai*' refers to one's mother's sister's husband.

⁹⁵ For a discussion on the differences between negotiated exchanges and reciprocal exchanges, see Molm *et al.*, 2000.

While engendering affection and intimacy can make employers more generous, flexible, and amiable, and the working relationship more reciprocal and trusting (Dickey, 2000: 478; Ozyegin, 2001; Erman & Kara, 2018), from the employers' perspective, developing closeness with domestic workers is considered an effective way of making workers more pliable, reliable, and trustworthy (Dickey, 2000: 478). This closeness also arguably brings better work results for employers, and may also help to cheapen the labour in the long-run, since workers who are given non-wage benefits are less likely to feel undervalued and ask for increases in pay (Ozyegin, 2001: 141-142). Indeed, when I asked Madhumita whether she was satisfied with her wages, Rs.1,600 per month (plus the extra Rs.1,000 per month noted earlier), she said: 'If I got a bit more, it would be better. If it was Rs.2,000, it would be good. But since I have been working for a long time, I feel bad to ask or say this to them (*amar pokhkhe mone hoe r etu beshi hole bhalo hoe. 2,000 taka hole bhalo hoe. Kintu anek purono hoe gechi to oi jonno bolteo kemon lage*)' (02.06.2015).⁹⁶ Creating a sense of intimacy with workers also gives employers leverage to ask for *more* work, particularly during holidays and special occasions when they may wish to change the schedule at short notice (Ozyegin, 2001: 142-143). Unlike the Chicana/Mexican American workers in Romero's study who were sometimes able to resist employer requests for more work by sticking to neatly-defined tasks and schedules (1988: 325), and, indeed, unlike Madhumita, who was happy to provide care and support to her employers, many workers feel that they cannot refuse employers' requests for more work. Though, for commuters, the employment relationship is not one of servitude, it is often hierarchical, steeped in ideas of class and caste and retaining elements of the feudal 'master-servant' relationship. Workers' bargaining power is, moreover, typically eroded rather than bolstered over time (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 169-170): 'By working there and staying there, you form a relationship with them so that when they ask you to do something, some "extra" work, you cannot say no' (Namita, 30.11.2015). Additionally, increasing suspicion and turnover – themes which will be discussed in detail later – and the fact that workers *are* in some cases fired for refusing to undertake extra work or for asking for pay increases (also see Parichiti, 2015: 45), loom large in

⁹⁶ The word '*purono*' (meaning 'old') invokes a sense of familiarity/familiality and attachment, going beyond a simple translation of 'working for a long time'.

workers' minds: 'They dismiss us just like that (*pot kore chariadey*)' (Namita, 30.11.2015).

Like Madhumita, Shobna shared a close, familial-like and mutually-supportive relationship with one of her four sets of employers and, for this family, often performed tasks and roles that she would not for others. Most of the time, Shobna was employed to clean and grind spices but during one visit to her home she told me that she was planning to forgo her usual responsibilities to help at the younger daughter's wedding – work which she had previously undertaken at the elder daughter's wedding and which she seemed to be looking forward to.

Lauren: What sort of work will you have to do there? Will it be different to what you do usually?

Shobna: Many people will be coming so I'll need to look after them, feed them. Since I've been working there a long time, I'll recognise a lot of people who are coming. I'll look after them and see what they need. I'll be there to take care of the 'guests'. And the other work I do in the house – they've arranged for someone else to come and do that.

Sohini: So for the wedding your only responsibility will be to look after guests?

Shobna: Yes, it's their daughter getting married and they can't look after all the guests so I'll be doing it. The two days I'll be staying there, I'll be getting paid.

Sohini: Will you get more money than you usually do?

Shobna: Yes. I'm having a break from the work I do usually, and doing this other work. For the wedding, I have to stay day and night so I'll get more money. I'll stay there and see who is coming and going. I'll also take people to the rented houses [wedding venue]. If they [employers] need something, they'll call me and ask me to bring it. I'll also make food for them [guests] and they'll eat and go to the rented houses. I'll go along with them by car. This is what happened last time, with the elder daughter's wedding.

Lauren: Are you looking forward to it? You seem happy.

Shobna: Yes, and I'll get 2,000 rupees for the two days. I need to work a bit harder, otherwise why would they pay me this much? But I'm happy too. It will be good to see so many people and to look after them. They've left everything to me. [...] They trust me a lot (*ora amake khub bishshash kore*). They let me wash and eat. I can do it all there. They open the *almirah* [cupboard] and ask me to lock it again. That's how much they trust me (18.01.2016).

As this excerpt shows, Shobna did not resent the change in schedule, which may or may not have been proposed at short notice, causing trouble with her other employers. Rather she seemed to be looking forward to the work – greeting and looking after guests – which she had enjoyed doing in the past and for which she would be paid well. She was, moreover, proud that, owing to her previous efforts, the

family had 'left everything' to her, trusting her to carry out this work with minimal supervision. Shobna was keen to stress how much she is trusted by these employers, using the example of the *almirah* – where, presumably, the family's valuables are kept – to underscore this point. This emphasis on trust is often discernible in domestic workers' accounts (Erman & Kara, 2018: 48), and, in India, it is connected to an increasingly prevalent and pernicious discourse which casts domestic workers as potential thieves and criminals (see, for example, Srivastava, 2011). There is a similar significance to Shobna's comments about washing and eating given the persistence of avoidance behaviour (Frøystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010: 152-155; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 156, 99-100), and the fact that, in other households where she worked she and her son were treated with (caste- and class-based) contempt.

Non-Wage Benefits

As indicated above, close, familial-like relationships with employers can and often do yield important non-wage benefits for workers. Support for children's education is among the most prized of these benefits; however, given the insecurity of men's work, as well as the range of other issues women domestic workers face, workers also greatly value access to credit. Like most informal sector workers, domestic workers do not, in general, have bank accounts and thus cannot take out bank loans or access social security easily.⁹⁷ Borrowing from informal moneylenders can involve exorbitant interest rates, meaning that those who decide to go down this route often spend the rest of their lives paying these loans off. Loans from employers are, by contrast, usually interest-free, a point which helps to explain why several of my participants reported having taken loans from employers. Charu, for instance, relied on a loan given to her by her employer after she contracted tuberculosis: 'I couldn't work but there was one woman I used to work for, I called her *ma*, and she helped me pay for my treatment. She gave Rs.60,000 and saved my life' (16.05.2015). As mentioned earlier, Chitra had also borrowed money from employers to help her and her husband buy land and build a house, and she had also later borrowed money to help pay for

⁹⁷ As noted in Chapter 4, the 2008 Social Security Act does not recognise job loss or unemployment benefits; and, like other proposed social security schemes, it only covers below poverty line families, thus excluding many domestic workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 281-282).

her daughter's wedding. Employers do not always or readily provide loans, and many workers do not ask for fear of refusal, or will only ask in times of absolute need (Parichiti, 2015: 51). Furthermore, taking loans from employers can push women into (further) debt and even destitution; and, by taking them, workers also arguably sacrifice their ability to negotiate for higher wages in the longer term (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 115-116). Having said all of this, loans from employers are vital, both in terms of helping to tide women over in times of need and in helping them to buy land and property (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 115-116).

It is not only big loans but also small gifts that are appreciated by workers. Madhumita proudly pointed out that the set of windows leaning against her bedroom wall was given to her by the *bhadralok* couple mentioned earlier; while Madhabi recalled, nostalgically, how a former employer had once given her a pair of dolls for her sons to play with when they were small. Madhabi had kept these dolls, which were placed on a high shelf in her bedroom for safe keeping, and captured in a photograph as part of the photo-voice project outlined in Chapter 3. The photograph, reproduced below (Figure 18), shows the doll on Madhabi's dresser, after it had been arranged, along with some of her other treasured possessions, into a 'still life' by Madhabi's eldest son, Bhola (18).

My son said, "I'll go up there and bring all this down and then we can take a photo of it." I don't have any jewellery so he said, "Take these and take a photograph." I got them from where I worked. They said to me, "Here, you have young children at home, take these home with you." They [her sons] used to dress them up and play with them. Still they decorate them and keep them clean. They won't part with them (Madhabi, 17.06.2015).



Figure 18. A 'still life' featuring some of Madhabi's treasured possessions. Photograph by Madhabi, June 2015 (reproduced with permission).

Although unreciprocated gift-giving on the part of employers reinforces the inequality of the relationship between employers and in some contexts workers resent such gifts, which are frequently things they do not want or cannot use (for instance, shoes that do not fit) and which they end up giving or throwing away (Rollins, 1985: 190-194), the commuters I knew generally accepted gifts from employers. Because of the power relationship and job insecurity, they arguably felt, at least on some level, that they *had to* accept gifts from employers, and that they also had to *show gratitude* for such gifts – even if these gifts were unwanted (see also Rollins, 1985: 190-194). However, workers also appeared to be pragmatic about gifts, which, despite a hidden cost, are sometimes useful (Rollins, 1985: 190-194). Indeed, as Madhabi's and other women's accounts show, gifts from employers are sometimes – if not often – things that workers want and value. The fact that workers also sometimes *ask* employers for old clothes, food, and other small items (Parichiti, 2015: 52) shows that such items bring immediate, tangible benefits for workers, helping to blunt the edge of the hardships they endure. Moreover, because giving and receiving gifts is closely associated with ideas of kinship in India (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 158), gifts from employers arguably help workers to feel that their relationships are more kin-like – something which speaks to wider, sociological literature on kindness and support (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Brownlie & Anderson, 2017; Brownlie & Spandler, 2018) and is particularly important given persisting hierarchies of caste and class.

Offerings of food and drink are similarly valued by workers, in part, as a material contribution, but also, again, as a recognition of their humanity, 'a symbolic act of care'

(Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 161; Parichiti, 2015: 48-49; Brownlie & Spandler, 2018). Commuters in many cases travel considerable distances to get to work (often too on empty stomachs) and they also cannot go home during the day for breaks and meals as city-dwelling workers can; offerings of food and drink, although often meagre and sporadic,⁹⁸ thus become, for workers, an expression of kindness and compassion on the part of employers. ‘There are some who understand that we come from afar and that we may be tired and hungry. They think, “how can we eat in front of them. We should offer them food”’ (Chitra, 12.07.2015). Though Shobna was offered a *tiffin* in all four of the households where she worked, she was particularly grateful that in the house where she had a good relationship with employers – where she was trusted to lock the *almirah* – she was also sometimes urged to give leftovers to her son.

After finishing school, he [Bijoy] waits for me in that house. *Boudi* likes kids a lot and says, “Even if we’re not at home, you can keep him here while you work.” Sometimes she says, “There’s biryani in the fridge, give some to your son.” They keep things just for him – this family is very kind. It’s the only house where they’re like that. That *boudi* also helps me when he’s ill. They’ve taken him to the doctors in their car before. Even if he’s at home, they ask after him. “How is his health?” (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

It is extremely important to workers that employers treat their children kindly, and make an effort to reduce the social distance between their own and workers’ families. By encouraging Shobna to give leftovers to Bijoy, and by offering to take the boy to the doctors and so on, Shobna’s employers were showing such kindness, as well as helping to alleviate some of the difficulties Shobna faced as a young, working-class mother – something which was important given that in the other homes where she worked there was little understanding of her situation and a lack of kindness towards her and her son.

⁹⁸ Parichiti’s research notes that while those engaged in cooking work sometimes receive a full meal in employers’ homes – whatever has been cooked – and in a few rare cases commuters are able to have both breakfast and lunch in (different) employers’ homes, most workers are only given small amounts of food – often snacks and leftovers, which many workers feel is not enough (2015: 49).

Outsiders in the Home

Although some workers *are* now given food and drink in employers' homes and caste-based discrimination in relation to food and drink is less overt than it was in the past,⁹⁹ many others are given nothing at all when they arrive on employers' doorsteps tired and hungry after their journey into the city – something which is understood by workers as a lack of kindness and compassion if not also a mark of (caste- and class-based) contempt on the part of employers (Parichiti, 2015: 48). 'We say, "we've travelled and it's been a long journey, give us food." But there are some who still don't give us anything. These kind of people will always be unaffected by other people's suffering' (Chitra, 12.07.2015). Indeed, just as workers who are offered refreshment in employers' homes often respond to questions about 'good treatment' with statements about food and drink – 'they give me *tiffin*' and so on (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 156) – those who are *not* offered anything are highly critical of this, often also noting the shallowness of employers' proclaimed affection. Charu's daughter-in-law, for instance, questioned Charu's admission that her employers' 'loved' her, pointing out that these employers did not buy Charu anything or give her anything to eat. Shibani, an older woman whom I met on the platform at Dhakuria Railway Station, was similarly critical and bitterly recounted how one former employer not only failed to offer her anything in the way of refreshment, but even asked her to throw food away.

I once worked in a Marwari house, they were very rich – 'billionaires' – but they never offered me food. After work, they gave me the money and asked me to leave. Yesterday, I had a little rice and after returning home today, I'll have a little rice again. They don't think that we are also humans. They ask us to throw out the vegetables from the day before, but they never offer us any (Shibani, 13.05.2015).

To Shibani, being asked to throw food away was as insulting as being asked to leave her employer's home – both indicating a lack of humanity and respect. The emphasis on this family's wealth also underscores the gross inequality of the relationship and is, furthermore, something which is apparent in other women's accounts, where poor treatment from employers is similarly explained in terms of increasing wealth and

⁹⁹ Chitra, for instance, noted how workers are now typically given better plates and cups than they were in the past and that these plates and cups are generally kept on the shelf with those of their employers, rather than in 'dirty places'.

inequality of employers ('since they've become rich, they don't care about me' and so on).

In one of the other three houses where Shobna worked, she and her son received very different treatment to that described earlier in relation to the kind *boudi*. Rather than welcoming Bijoy and offering him something to eat, this employer disapproved of Shobna bringing Bijoy with her to work (which Shobna was sometimes forced to do) and expected Bijoy – a boy of seven – to sit quietly at the foot of the stairs while Shobna carried out her work in the rooms above. Shobna felt guilty leaving Bijoy by himself; and she also feared that he might accidentally break one of the many 'glass things' in the house if left to his own devices. In an attempt to keep him occupied, then, Shobna would give Bijoy her *tiffin* to eat (secretly, as her employers disapproved of this), or else a packet of biscuits she would bring with her. 'They say, "leave him downstairs and come up. Don't bring him up." They should at least give him a biscuit, but they don't. I have to spend money on biscuits for him' (12.12.2015).

In this house, Shobna was also not allowed to use the bathroom, something which she again interpreted as a mark of indignity and disrespect. Moreover, on those occasions when Shobna had momentarily left her work to go and relieve herself elsewhere (often in the house mentioned earlier, where she had a close relationship with employers and could use the *kaajer lok* bathroom), her employers had scolded her for taking too much time.

They say, "What took you so long? When you go to the bathroom, it takes so long?" They say these kinds of things to me. But you see it will take time to go there, use the bathroom, wash and come back again. But they say, "Why are you so late?" Then I get angry. First you don't allow me to use your bathroom, so I have to go to some other place, then you say, "Why are you late?" I cannot go there and come back quickly. In the rainy season, it takes time to wash and change my clothes. It cannot happen quickly. But when I come back, they say, "Why do you take so much time? We also use the toilet but we don't take so much time." During the rainy season, we have a lot of problems. Also, suppose we have bad health (*shohir kharap*), it's very difficult. When it happens, for a week it's difficult. I have to keep changing it [cloth] throughout the day... Sometimes we get angry and say, "Why don't you provide us with a separate bathroom, for us workers?" They say, "We would need money for that." But they spend money on making their own toilets. People like us go into your bathrooms to clean, to wash clothes. If you didn't have people like us, who would clean your clothes, your toilets? You people wouldn't do it yourselves (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

Shobna's account reads as a sharp critique of the caste and class prejudices that structure domestic labour in India, indeed noting that, without domestic workers ('people like us'), employers ('you people') would be left to clean their own clothes and bathrooms – something which, Shobna contends, they would simply be unwilling to do. Shobna clearly resented having to rush between different employer homes to use the toilet, and she also resented having to explain herself on returning from other employers' bathrooms. As we have seen in Chapter 5, commuters in many cases leave their homes in the early morning, returning only in the late afternoon or early evening; they also face problems in accessing toilets on the way to the city, and particularly during the rainy season, when, as during menstruation, the need to wash and change is greater. Workers can go to the toilet 'in secret' in employers' homes, but this brings serious risks for workers given their lack of bargaining power and constant monitoring; the other option – not to go while at work or in the city – also involves risks to health (Parichiti, 2015: 47-48; Menon, 2015).

Shobna alludes to some of these issues, and indeed unflinchingly points out the hypocrisy involved in employing someone to clean but not use your bathroom; however, she does not at any point demand to use her employers' bathroom. She asks instead that her employers – and employers generally – build an additional bathroom, for the sole use of workers. Such ideas about separate bathroom use stem from historical living arrangements and practices, where live-in servants had their own quarters and bathrooms, as well as a persisting reluctance among employers to share their bathrooms with workers. Workers are generally expected to use separate *kaafer lok* bathrooms where such facilities are available; indeed, it was likely that the only reason Shobna could use the bathroom in the *bhadralok* couple's home was because there was a separate *kaafer lok* bathroom. In new-build and smaller houses and apartments, there is usually only one, family bathroom and, in many cases, an implicit understanding that this space will not be shared between employers and workers: 'It's their bathroom, we are workers (*oder bathroom, amra kaafer lok*)' (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

Paromita, the agency manager introduced in Chapter 4, believed that the reason employers, or 'parties', dislike domestic workers using their toilets is because domestic workers do not know *how* to use toilets. According to Paromita, this is

understandable since she too has reservations about letting domestic workers use her toilet when they visit her office.

I understand complaints from 'parties' because when some of the girls come here, they also don't flush. I walk in there afterwards and have to see it! They don't know how to use toilets properly. I tell them [employers], "Madam, just teach them how to use the toilet. Give them another chance and if they still don't get it right, I'll 'discontinue' them" (Paromita, 07.10.2015).

While Paromita makes a valid point, especially considering that many middle- and upper-class Bengalis/Indians now have 'Western'-style toilets in their homes, her account at the same time reproduces a classist discourse about the 'ignorant' worker which overlooks the fact that domestic workers learn to use and operate daily a wide range of technology and machinery in employers' homes – water filters, washing machines, microwaves. Paromita also explained that in many cases she ends up agreeing to 'discontinue' workers at the request of employers who are reluctant to heed her advice and 'teach' workers – something which clearly speaks to employer inhibitions about class and caste, which are frequently expressed through idioms of cleanliness and 'hygiene' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 156-157; see also Frøystad, 2003: 84). Because of historical practices and taboos around bathroom use, employers may of course simply not think to ask workers if they would like to use the bathroom (especially in the case of commuters/live-out workers who typically work for short periods in employers' homes), and workers, too, often feel too embarrassed (*lajja lage*) to bring up the issue, only doing so if there is a *kaajer lok* bathroom available, or if they are desperate and/or have a good relationship with the *boudi*.

Just as workers speak of the various indignities they suffer in employers' homes with respect to food and drink and bathroom access, they also resent being rushed, complaining about employers who hurry and scold them for being late (also see Ray & Qayum, 2010: 89). Chitra, for instance, often grew frustrated with employers when they tried to hurry her, this rushing being a key part of the 'bad' treatment mentioned earlier: 'There are times when I talk back and say, "It won't work if you rush me like this"' (12.07.2015). Shobna also spoke of her wish to work in a single home each day, where she could spread out her work more.

If I had the opportunity to work in just one house, all day until 5pm, I'd do that.
Looking after kids or cleaning and cooking – work that lasts longer so you can

stay there and eat there. I'd work and then at 5pm come back home. Working in four houses, I get Rs.3,500 but if I worked in just one house and stayed there all day I could get the same and it would be easier than going from one house to another. I wouldn't have to rush. Now the houses are all in different places and I'm often late (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

As noted in Chapters 4 and 5, the shift to live-out work and increasing role specialisation has meant that commuters and other live-out workers often juggle several different jobs to earn a sufficient living, rushing between employers' homes, as well as to and from the city each day. Few have the sort of job Shobna describes, where they can spend the whole day, or a large portion of the day, working in a single home, doing different kinds of work. Moreover, because workers spend typically short periods in employers' homes each day, employers often wish to maximise this time, giving workers a heavy workload and expecting them to hurry through tasks, with few or no periods of rest (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 85-87; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 101-102; see also Goldstein, 2003: 62). Failure to complete the given workload places strain on the employment relationship and carries the risk of dismissal (see also Parichiti, 2015: 44); but equally, undertaking a heavy burden of work – and indeed *extra* work – at employers' behest can make workers late for the next house, which causes further problems not only with their other employers, but also with their own husbands and families at the end of the working day.

The frantic pace of commuters' work and lives was often apparent when travelling with workers and talking to them about their work and lives, but it was also evident more generally during fieldwork, particularly when I visited middle-class friends at home and had the opportunity to observe their 'maids' at work. In most cases, these workers would briefly pause whatever they were doing (chopping vegetables, wiping floors) to say 'hello' or be introduced, before resuming their work or hurrying back to whichever room they had come from; and on the few occasions where workers were invited to sit and talk with us (often after friends' relatives discovered the topic of my research), their hesitation spoke volumes – about the rarity of opportunities to sit and rest, about ideas of class/caste and the 'politics of sitting' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 149), and possibly about their *own* concerns about falling behind and becoming late for whatever they had to do next. Even Dipali, who would eat leftovers each morning after she arrived at my host family's home would do this standing up in the kitchen.

The hurried and relentless pace of commuters' work and lives explains why they tend to speak positively about employers who allow them to take their time doing their work. These employers are, not coincidentally, those with whom workers share good, reciprocal relationships; indeed, workers often emphasise that they work in these homes as if they are working in their 'own homes' – statements which may be read as an attempt by workers to distance themselves from an understanding of domestic work as (dirty and menial) wage labour (Ozyegin, 2001: 102-105; Gregson & Lowe, 1994: 226-227) and thus in conflict with dominant ideas about femininity and domesticity (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 178), but which also highlight the importance of autonomy for workers. Madhumita explained, for instance, that in the *bhadralok* couple's home, where she was treated 'like family', she spent around 2 to 3 hours each day, even though she had less work to do in this house than in the other two houses where she worked for considerably shorter periods. She spaced out her work in this home and indeed often became distracted from her work, chatting with the man she called *meshomoshai*; whereas in the other two homes, she was expected to focus narrowly on the task at hand and as a result crammed her work into much shorter periods – an hour and a half in one home and just 40 minutes in the other. Since Madhumita was paid roughly the same amount in all three houses, the exception being the *bhadralok* couple's home where she was given additional money each month for her daughters, there was, in these other two homes, no incentive to invest any more in the employment relationship. By doing only what was required in these two homes and doing it quickly, Madhumita arguably had more time to work elsewhere, including in the home where she was respected and cared for. While autonomy is, then, highly important to workers, it must be balanced with the need to combine jobs/incomes and the time pressure this entails when combined with women's own domestic labour and commutes.

Questions of autonomy are of course related to questions of security and suspicion since the 'mistress' or *boudi* is often at home during the day to supervise workers, and there is, as Chapter 2 touched on, a prevalent discourse about workers as potential thieves and criminals, which, although not new, has intensified with the move to apartment-living and part-time/live-out work (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 43-46, 59). Indeed, with the shift to live-out workers, employers are, in many cases, fearful that their domestic workers, who are in many cases complete strangers, will steal from

them or harm them in some way – ideas which are reinforced through sensationalist newspaper reports and advertisements (see, for example, Srivastava, 2011) and which have contributed to a cycle of suspicion, dismissal, and turnover.¹⁰⁰ Domestic workers are, indeed, often the first to be accused when something goes missing from the house, and, in recent years, there have been increasing calls for employers to ‘verify’ domestic workers via the local police, a process which typically involves collecting details about workers – comments on their physical appearance, copies of their fingerprints and so on (Sampath, 2017; also see Srivastava, 2011; Figure 19).



Figure 19. Advertisement taken from *The Hindu* (Mumbai edition), 8 April 2018.

¹⁰⁰ While domestic workers do sometimes steal from their employers (often small food items and jewellery), cases of workers murdering employers are extremely rare. Furthermore, in many cases, the abuse happens the other way around, with employers abusing and sometimes murdering workers (Dhillon, 2017; Singh & Chettri, 2018).

In gated communities, this climate of fear and suspicion means that domestic workers passing through these spaces to work in employers' apartments must, in many cases, negotiate a range of security practices including identity checks, bag checks, and CCTV monitoring (Falzon, 2004; Dhillon, 2017). Namita worked in one such complex and explained with the help of her teenage daughter, Sanchita, what entering/exiting her workplace involved.

Lauren: _____ is a very big 'complex', isn't it? And we've heard that there are a lot of 'security problems', with the 'gate'...

Namita: [nodding] We have 'cards', one 'I-card', which we have to show and then they let us go through. Sometimes when they know us, by our faces, they just ask us our 'card number' and write it down.

Lauren: Are there 'cameras'?

Namita: Yes, a lot of 'cameras'. There are two in front of the 'main gate', and behind also. There are two 'gates' and they both have 'cameras'. It's very 'strict' (*khub kora kori*).

Lauren: Two 'gates' - are these separate 'gates'?

Namita: Yes, separate gates. All the *kaafer meye* (domestic workers), 'drivers', 'sweepers' – we use one 'gate' and then there's another for the *malik* (owners/masters).

Lauren: Does 'bag-search' happen at _____?

Namita: Yes, it happens.

Sanchita: 'Bag', 'body' – all 'search' happens.

Namita: Now they've brought a 'machine' near the 'main gate', for the body. If I have a 'bomb' or a gun, the alarm will sound, 'automatic'.

Sohini: Oh, okay. Like what they have in the 'metro'?

Namita: Yes exactly.

Sanchita: And at the 'airport'.

Namita: Earlier they used something you hold in your hand, but now you walk through [the machine]. The 'machine' is for weapons (*hatiyar*). The construction workers (*mistri*) come in and have a lot of 'machines' – tools, rods – so sometimes the alarm goes off.

Lauren: Sometimes when I go to the shops, they do 'bag-search' and I become annoyed. Do you also feel like this in _____?

Namita: That happens, yes – in 'Big Bazar'. Sometimes they also don't let you inside with your 'bag'. 'Bag-search' is everywhere. What can I say? (*ki bolbo?*) Nobody likes to show [what's inside] their 'bag'. We have a lot of things in there – and sometimes it's men so I don't want to open it up [...] At the 'main gate', it's mostly men.

Lauren: Are they okay, the 'guards'?

Namita: They're all different and they keep changing. Some are bad (*bodmash*) – those who open my 'bag' and take out everything. Sometimes I get into fights with the 'lady guard'. *Arre baba!* "We go in and out every day, you can see that I only carry an umbrella, water bottle and purse. You don't have to take them all out on the table each time." Some people get angry about this, but what use is it? We have to work there and it's our 'Sirs' and

'Madams' who've asked them to check, so the 'security' people are just doing their job. There's also a 'gate pass' – nothing can go out unless it's written down. If there's a little food someone has given to you or some old things, you have to show it and it needs to be written down. If it's not they'll call my 'Madam'. It's fine. Actually, it's good what they've done, so people won't steal. But even so, people steal and get away with it (30.11.2015).

It is, as Namita indicates, increasingly difficult to avoid security guards and security practices when out and about in cities such as Kolkata. Guards are encountered at almost every turn – in offices, schools and colleges, in hospitals, airports and railway/subway stations, in shopping malls and supermarkets, and in private residential complexes (see also Gooptu, 2013: 15) – and bag-checking and body-scanning are also practised in many of these sites. These practices, together with the more general deployment of security guards and the proliferation of gated communities, point to a widespread preoccupation with security and protection in India, which in turn reflects middle- and upper-class fears about terrorism, violence, and crime (Falzon, 2004; Gooptu 2013). Domestic workers are part of this dangerous underclass, but they also present a more specific problem to employers since, as Dickey notes, they not only deal with dirt, but also *represent* dirt (2000: 462). Employers attempt to protect their families and homes by controlling workers' movements and encouraging both closeness to and distance from them (2000: 462); and since slippage can happen the other way around, from employers' homes to the outside world, they also seek to prevent gossip and theft (Dickey, 2000: 462) – a point which helps to explain why workers in Namita's complex must carry a letter from employers when taking home something which has been given to them as a gift.

Although the discourse of suspicion and criminality plays out most starkly in the case of gated communities, it also plays out in other contexts, including in more ordinary middle-class houses and apartments. The phrase *khit khit kore* was oft-repeated by participants and encapsulates the experience of being followed about, picked at, and scolded by employers who are perceived to be constantly irritated and dissatisfied: 'Some are always behind my back, *khit khit kore*. They ask me to wash my hands constantly and tell me not to spill things' (Chitra, 12.07.2015). Even if workers are not suspected of trying to steal from their employers, such treatment is clearly infantilising and reflects a lack of autonomy at work. There is, moreover, often a distinct class/caste flavour to employers' admonishments, with workers being instructed to

clean their hands or avoid touching things: ‘They say to me, “don’t open this, don’t touch this.” [...] They very much hate people [like us] (*ora lok ke khub ghrina kore*)’ (Purnima, 27.04.2015). Additionally, while (unknown) women workers are generally thought to be less threatening than (unknown) men, there is still, from an employer’s perspective, a need for supervision given concerns about theft/criminality and pollution/‘hygiene’, as well as women’s sexuality. A middle-class employer explained that she had had ‘doubts’ about a ‘maid’ after this woman had insinuated something she ‘did not like’ about an acquaintance of hers, another ‘maid’. The ‘maid’ had been preparing to visit her *desher bari* (ancestral/natal/own home) and had suggested to her employer someone who could temporarily replace her – a common practice in Kolkata. However, in discussing these arrangements, the ‘maid’ had made a passing comment about the replacement’s character, indicating to her employer that she should not be left alone with her husband. The employer told the ‘maid’ that she would find someone herself and, after this woman returned from her trip, dismissed her too, explaining to her that she no longer needed anyone.

I realised that this woman probably had some connection with women who do this kind of work [sex work], which I did not like. So, when she came back, I did not put her to work again. I just informed her that, “You see, I’m not going to keep any domestic helps in future, I think I will just do it myself.” I just told her in this way because I realised probably she was into something which I did not like. I don’t know if they’re exploited or whether they do this knowingly. Because this is a very prevailing practice in the parlours in Kolkata (field notes, 05.07.2015).

Although there is a link between domestic work and sex work (Sahni & Shankar, 2013; Shah, 2014; Guha, 2018), this account at the same time speaks to a more insidious narrative which constructs domestic workers, and poor, working-class, low-caste women more generally, as ‘promiscuous’, ‘shameless’, and a ‘bad influence’ (Ray, 2000: 698; Sariola, 2010: 25; Grover, 2011: 50-54; Still, 2014: 94-95, 111-116). This narrative, which is not dissimilar from the narrative which sees men servants as potential sexual predators (Ray, 2000: 699),¹⁰¹ and which is linked to widely-held notions about women’s sexuality as ‘dangerous, threatening, and uncontrollable’ (Grover, 2011: 52; see also Ray, 2000: 698), explains why many middle-class

¹⁰¹ Raka Ray (2000: 699) notes that with the move away from trusted ‘family retainer’, employers are increasingly distrustful of domestic workers in general and increasingly aware of the masculinity of men workers.

employers fear that their ‘maids’ will engage in illicit sexual activity with their husbands, sons and (unknown) men more generally. ‘Uppermost in all employers’ minds when they hire a young woman’, writes Raka Ray (2000: 698), ‘is the risk of her potential sexuality, because unprotected women are perceived as sexually dangerous and therefore not respectable’. These ideas, which are bound up with ideas of class and caste, also render domestic workers, and poor/working-class/Dalit women more generally, vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and exploitation (Sariola, 2010: 25; Still, 2014: 113-114). Indeed, as noted in Chapter 4, while workers do not generally admit to having experienced sexual harassment and abuse, at work or anywhere – again, because of ideas about women’s ‘honour’ and associated feelings of shame – evidence suggests that it is not uncommon for employers to take advantage of workers (Parichiti, 2015: 45-46; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 149).

In various ways, then, whether it be through forms of avoidance behaviour in relation to food and drink or toilet access, or through mistrust and monitoring, workers are made to feel different, ‘other’ in employers’ homes and it is this treatment which they most resent (see also Dill, 1980; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1988: 325-326). This experience of ‘otherness’ applies to many different types of domestic workers, but it is arguably more pronounced in the case of commuters, who are ‘outsiders’ in employers’ homes *and* in the city. Indeed, we saw in Chapter 5, how commuters are often seen by urban, middle-class employers as a dirty, dangerous rabble and, as we shall now see, they are also often stereotyped by city-dwelling workers – for creating competition and pushing down wages and so on. The next section explores the issue of job security in more detail, discussing why, despite such widespread dissatisfaction with employers and jobs, commuters often decide to stay in these jobs.

Why Workers Stay: The Work of ‘Adjustment’

Because domestic workers’ bargaining power generally decreases over time, with workers failing to receive pay increments and, in many cases, taking on *more* work for the same pay, it follows that workers will, in the absence of increments and non-wage benefits (or because of mistreatment), leave jobs for new ones – often gaining better pay and terms of employment as a result (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 108, 169-171). Santi, for instance, explained that she had once walked out an employer after

finding out that she would not be getting a Puja bonus. 'I said, "I've worked for you for four months and you're not giving me a bonus? I'll leave" (25.11.2015). Mithu had similarly left a job after her employer's daughter started to cause trouble: 'She used to complain (*khit khit korto*). She'd say, "this is not right" or "that's not been done properly", and I used to get angry. The *khawa-pora* girl pushed it further – she wanted her relative to work there. I thought, "I won't go to work [here] anymore, I'll go to some other place"' (23.07.2015). In many cases, however, workers decide to stay in jobs they are dissatisfied with, often becoming bitter about their inability to bargain with employers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 169). Namita, who, as mentioned earlier, resented the stringent security measures in the complex where she worked, was generally unhappy with her work and pay; however, because she had only ever worked in this complex and lacked the kind of networks other women had, she felt she could not leave. Shobna, too, continued working in the house where she was not allowed to use the bathroom and where she and her son were treated with contempt. Unlike Santi, Shobna could not rely on family members to take care of her son: her husband worked long hours and her in-laws were only very occasionally willing to help; her own parents had also passed away years earlier. Not knowing many people in the city and there being no other option in terms of childcare, Shobna was stuck; and although Bijoy's presence was not exactly welcomed in this house, it was at least tolerated, meaning that Shobna could rest assured that Bijoy would be safe while she worked.

For Ruksana, a Muslim woman in her late-thirties, other factors influenced her decision to continue working for (Hindu) employers whom, she explained, had repeatedly let her down.

At Eid I asked them to give me Rs.500 so that I could get clothes for my kids. She said, "We can't give you so much money." Another time, I said, "I've been working for you for fourteen years. Won't you help with my daughter's wedding?" I cried in front of her but she didn't give me anything. I felt hurt. I enter that house at eight in the morning and I work continuously until two-thirty. I know everything that's in their house but I don't think about it. They give me Rs.4,500 at the end of the month. I just take it and leave (Ruksana, 26.07.2015).

Ruksana clearly felt cheated by these employers, emphasising how hard she works for this family; she cooks and cleans up after them, often working from the early morning to the mid-afternoon without a break – a point she reiterated later in our conversation by saying, 'They have tea ten times a day, keep asking me for things,

asking me to do this and that' (26.07.2015). It is also likely, given the earlier discussion about workers' bargaining power – and indeed the description of her heavy burden of work – that this workload had increased over time, without any commensurate rise in pay (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 170). This would certainly help to explain the general tone of bitterness in her account, and her comment about knowing 'everything that's in their house'. Indeed, while this comment could be read as implying something about her employers' relative wealth (and thus their ability to provide additional financial support), it could also be read as implying something about the temptation to steal, and in turn Ruksana's restraint: the fact that she does not even 'think about it' underscores the broader point Ruksana appears to be making about loyalty and trust.

Although Ruksana had often considered leaving this job, periodically asking others to help her find new work, she had nevertheless stayed – a decision that was likely connected to the climate of intolerance towards Muslims in India. Muslim workers, as noted in Chapters 2 and 4, often find it difficult to secure jobs – particularly cooking jobs (Sharma, 2016: 55-56); and, even in cases where they *do* manage to secure jobs, problems frequently arise, with workers being branded 'illegal' and so on (Dey, 2017; Dhillon, 2017). Ruksana may have been worried about finding new work, or work where she could be similarly open about her Muslim identity. She explained how she had previously had to work with a Hindu name and was reluctant to go back to doing this: 'In one house where I used to work, a Marwari house, I was made to work as a Hindu. For three months I worked like that, but then I realised that if someone found out, they'd speak ill of me so I left' (26.07.2015). Ruksana's wage was also relatively substantial (compared to the wages of other domestic workers), and she had not been dismissed for asking for a bonus and additional financial help – which might have been the case had she been working for other employers. This alone indicates that there was at least *some* degree of understanding between Ruksana and her employer.

Like Ruksana, Arun (45) had worked for the same employer for many years, despite being dissatisfied with his work and earnings. He was employed by this woman, a professor in her late sixties, as a driver and had worked for her for eighteen years. Arun did not speak particularly positively about this woman, to whom he referred as *malik*, or his work; indeed, much of our conversation focused on the drawbacks of

driving – the low pay, the long hours, the strain on his eyesight, the exhaustion, and the constant barrage of criticism from employers, pedestrians, and other drivers. ‘I have to hear a lot of things. I’ve been hearing [things] for such a long time’ (Arun, 07.06.2015). Arun’s ‘duty’ was technically for ten hours starting in the morning each day, but he often worked late into the night, in some cases missing his train home and having to stay over at his employer’s house. He had fixed days off (Sundays) but his employer often phoned him on these days, asking him to bring her something or take her somewhere, the use of mobile phones here blurring the distinction between home and work life (on this point, see Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Wajcman, 2008). Arun did not mind this too much – viewing it as part of the job – but, at the same time, said he would prefer an office job, something with shorter, fixed hours and something a bit more ‘respectable’ (*bhodrosto*). ‘If someone gives me an appointment letter and asks me to join tomorrow, I would leave this work today’ (Arun, 07.06.2015).

Arun had been more enthusiastic about driving when he first started out, largely because, in the early 1990s, this work could fetch good money. After spending several years in more casual employment – painting and decorating, construction work, *pandal*¹⁰² work – Arun had appreciated a ‘fixed’ monthly salary. He had also enjoyed a good relationship with one of his early employers, a family that had treated him ‘like their own’ (*ekdom nijeder moto*) and to whom he had felt closer in the three years he spent with them than in all the years he had spent with the professor.

Lauren: What was it like in that house?

Arun: The son of the house use to call me *dada* and I use to treat him like my brother [...] He used to get up on my back, he used to give me things to eat when we went places. He used to treat me like their own. My employer, this boy’s mother, used to treat me like her son and I used to call her *boudi*. When I used to go for work there, they used to keep my *tiffin* ready. They used to make me eat first and then they’d give me the keys for the car. This was how it was there.

Lauren: What about this house where you work now? Is it different?

Arun: [Hesitates] She also gives food but it’s nothing like that. There is no problem but she is like, “do your work and leave”.

Basudha: Not a family type?

Arun: No [short pause]. It’s there but only a little bit. In that house, they used to make me sit at their table and eat with them. But here, when she gives me something to eat, she says “take this and have it”. It’s not like [it was] with

¹⁰² *Pandals* are temporary structures that are built to celebrate important occasions and events. They are found across the city during Durga Puja.

them, who used to make me eat at their table. Like sitting with her son and eating or sitting on their sofa and eating. This is the difference (07.06.2015).

Part of the reason Arun had felt so at home with this family was, as his account illustrates, because they treated him, 'like their own', 'like family'. He was addressed respectfully and trusted; he was also given food and made to sit and eat with the family. With the professor, it was different. While not unkind, this woman kept Arun at a distance: rather than being asked to sit and eat with her, Arun was instructed to take his food and 'have it'; he was also expected to sit separately – that is, away from his employer and away from her tables, chairs, beds, and sofas. Additionally, while this woman placed *some* trust in Arun, indeed giving him the keys to the house each time she went abroad to visit her children, she did not trust him completely: the bedrooms, after all, remained locked during these periods. Arun was also aware that this trust could, at any point, break down altogether: 'nothing has happened in these eighteen years but I still fear' (07.06.2015). Arun was particularly on edge each time something went missing from the house – often an item misplaced and later found by his employer. It was for these various reasons, then, that Arun was cynical about this woman's claims to familiarity and affection, indeed regarding her 'sweet talk' (*mishti kota*) as a strategy to exact (more) work from him and grumbling about the gifts she brought him from abroad – t-shirts, snacks, plastic watches – which were inexpensive and often things he already had: 'money would be better' (07.06.2015). Moreover, when I asked him directly if he felt 'part of the family' in her house, he responded using 'they' (*ora*), seemingly making a more general point about employers and contradicting his earlier comments about his former employer: 'They say [so] but no, not really. Is it ever possible? They are 'high society' people and we are 'lower'' (07.06.2015).

While Arun felt undervalued by, and often frustrated with his employer, he had nevertheless stayed in this job for eighteen years – a decision that was, in part, due to a sense of familiarity, loyalty and obligation, as well as a sense of mutual attachment and dependence. Indeed, while Arun spoke of wishing to find new work, he also spoke, as Madhumita did, about the consequences of having become a long-standing employee and thus of his inability to leave easily. This woman had become increasingly reliant on Arun since her husband had died and her children had moved abroad, and he was, like many drivers, required to do much more than driving. He

would accompany her on hospital visits and pick up medicine for her; as stated earlier, he would also check on the house (and the 'maidservants') when she was away. In addition, when she was ill, he would stay overnight to help look after her, even though, as Arun himself noted, she employed *ayahs* for this purpose. Arun thought that his employer felt better having him there, worried perhaps that the *ayahs* would not 'look after her properly', while, from his side, there was arguably a sense of duty and care: 'Since I have been working there a long time, I have become like a 'family member', so we have obligations towards each other (*jehetu ami okhane purono hoe gechi onar kache, ekta family member er moto, shei jonno amar opor ektu jor kore, ami onar opor ektu jor kori*)' (07.06.2015). Indeed, later in the conversation, Arun reiterated this point, explaining how he had been working for a long time and therefore had to 'adjust'.

Arun's decision to stay working for this woman was also likely connected to the fact that his chances of finding 'respectable' work, or indeed any other kind of stable work were generally quite slim. Like factory work, office work is not easy to find in liberalised and globalised Kolkata (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 136), and Arun had only studied until Class 8 (aged 13-14). Retail and security jobs are more plentiful but they often favour younger workers (Gooptu, 2009: 48; Gooptu, 2013: 17); security work also entails similar drawbacks to those mentioned by Arun in relation to driving – low pay, long hours, exhaustion (Gooptu, 2013: 25-28). Arun had once toyed with the idea of becoming a taxi driver but had not liked the idea of having an uncertain income; he mentioned a similar problem with respect to driving for an agency, mentioning the high rate of turnover which makes it difficult to earn a 'fixed', uninterrupted income. Driving for the professor, Arun could at least count on receiving a regular, monthly wage, plus overtime and an extra month's salary for Puja. There was, moreover, *some* trust between him and this woman, evidenced by the fact that it was he who was given the house keys each time she went abroad. Similarly, there was *some* understanding regarding Arun's own situation; his employer would generally be understanding if his wife or daughter were sick and he had to stay back in the village to take care of them. 'She says, "do what you need to do and then come for work." In this sense, she is good' (07.06.2015). Overall, then, it seems that this job offered Arun a degree of stability and security that he would otherwise have struggled to find, and it was

arguably this concern for stability and security, together with a sense of duty, care, and mutual trust, that shaped his decision to stay.

For Anjali, whose story has been outlined in earlier chapters, it was a combination of ill-health and financial worries that constrained her ability to change jobs. With various medicines and treatments as well as her youngest daughter's wedding to pay for, Anjali was under severe financial pressure, and it was this pressure that led her both to keep commuting and to ask periodically for additional financial support from her employers. One couple, whom, Anjali explained, did not usually talk harshly to her, typically refused such requests, explaining that they already paid her a fair wage and sometimes critiquing her work: 'They say to me "We pay you Rs.2,000. Why don't you do this properly?"' (22.04.2015). Anjali also frequently clashed with this couple over leave: 'When I tried to take leave on the eighteenth of this month, they said, "Why are you taking leave?" So, I said, "What are you saying? Are you human? I need leave. I have to go to the doctor and I still have three holidays [to take]"' (22.04.2015). Anjali's mentioning of her illness, which was likely regarded as a form of emotional manipulation by her employers, was arguably her way of inducing feelings of guilt in her employers, and thus of achieving what she desired – in this case, flexibility regarding leave (see also Ozyegin, 2001: 144-146). The emphasis on 'human need', articulated here in the phrase 'are you human?' and discernible in other workers' accounts, was likely for the same effect, as a means of appealing to and challenging her employers. Therefore, while workers sometimes reinforce ideas about themselves as machine-like and indefatigable, they at the same time resist and challenge this narrative by asserting their right to time off and rest. Indeed, whether in the context of work or commuting, workers often made a similar point: 'You have to take a break, you can't always go on like this' (Madhabi, 09.06.2015).

Anjali similarly explained how she challenged her employers over pay. Indeed, when the aforementioned couple refused to give Anjali money and told her that she was free to leave if she was not happy with her pay, Anjali snapped, saying, 'You pay me Rs.2,000, but what value does this have these days?' Like others, Anjali resented her employers' use of market language, and the implication that the employment relationship is one of fair exchange, when, in reality, an overstocked labour market means that workers have neither alternative employment options nor bargaining strength vis-à-vis the employer (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 171-172). While Anjali was

quick to contest her employers' claim about the fairness of her pay, she was simultaneously careful not to go too far, indeed biting her tongue for the remainder of the afternoon. She was aware that too much back-chat could result in her wages being cut or worse: dismissal. Anjali spoke directly about this issue of vulnerability later in our conversation, explaining how she cannot easily find new work and, like Arun, must be pragmatic and 'adjust': 'Even if I feel upset, what can I do? I have to 'adjust' (22.04.2015). With so many workers competing for jobs, Anjali was arguably concerned about a gap in income and how she, as a single mother with serious health issues, would manage; and, because of her ill-health, her job options were already limited. These various factors, then, constrained Anjali's 'freedom' to leave.

Job Insecurity

Anjali's account, like many of the others discussed here, highlights a broader problem affecting commuters, as well as other live-out workers: job insecurity. Indeed, the degree of competition and turnover in contemporary domestic work is what leads workers in many cases to settle for unsatisfactory but (relatively) stable jobs. Labour is cheap and plentiful, and so the rate of dismissal and turnover is correspondingly high. Workers also sometimes walk out on employers, which again contributes to turnover. The discourse of suspicion has a similar effect since workers and employers in many cases do not know and trust one another, and workers are frequently dismissed on the grounds of (suspected) theft. Workers who fail to turn up to work or who are repeatedly late thus run the risk of being fired, as do those who refuse employer requests for more work or ask for more pay. Additionally, employers sometimes perceive an advantage in hiring new workers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 108). The extreme heterogeneity in the sector means that new workers are not always more expensive: employers may get new workers at lower wages while workers who leave jobs may get new jobs at higher wages (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 108). Long-standing employees, as we have seen, also often require (and indeed ask for) more non-wage benefits from employers, familiarity thus constituting an additional 'cost' to employers which is usually not present with new workers who are less likely to ask for such benefits (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 108-109). New workers are, furthermore, perceived to be more honest and hard-working than older/established workers, and

thus less likely to skimp on their work and take leave without notice (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 108-109).

While all live-out workers struggle with this degree of competition and turnover, commuters are in a particularly tricky position since they frequently experience problems en route to the city and subsequently arrive late to employers' homes. Their numbers are also often highly concentrated in the urban neighbourhoods where they work (typically those that are close to railway stations), which in turn leads to stiff competition and undercutting. Sen and Sengupta note how city-dwelling domestic workers often accuse commuters or 'outsiders' of stealing jobs and pushing down wages, and there is reason to believe this is happening since 'commuter workers (like new migrant workers) have less to choose from, greater financial compulsions (which force them to take long arduous journeys every day) and thus are willing to work for lower wages' (2016: 118; see also Roy, 2003: 84; Ray & Qayum, 2010: 90). As mentioned earlier, commuters sometimes receive food in the houses where they work, which might be perceived as payment in kind, thus accounting for a reduced cash wage (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 118). City-dwelling workers must, therefore, accept very low wages or risk being replaced by commuters – the latter being a particular source of anxiety for workers during periods of leave/absence (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 118-120).

Commuters not only replace workers who live in the city, but also frequently replace *one another*. Madhabi was one of several women to speak about being dismissed by an employer after taking leave, in her case to visit Haridwar¹⁰³ – a trip she had been planning for some time and which she had discussed with her employer. Madhabi had been in this job for a year and believed she had an understanding with her employer; though they had not liked the idea of her taking leave, her employer had, in the end, agreed to the trip, providing Madhabi find a replacement to fill in for her while she was away. Coming back to Kolkata, then, Madhabi was maddened to find that she had been *permanently* replaced, and that her employer had given this other woman – the replacement – money Madhabi was owed. 'I was meant to get Rs.600 but they gave it to her. [...] I said, "Where will I go?" but they wouldn't listen' (09.06.2015). Madhabi's employers had told her that they had simply preferred this other woman's work, but it

¹⁰³ Haridwar is an important Hindu pilgrimage site in North India.

is likely, given the prevalence of undercutting, that the replacement had (also) offered to work for a lower wage. Indeed, the fact that Madhabi later reflected on this incident differently, commenting rather calmly that it had perhaps been 'God's will' for her to find new work, suggests that undercutting occurs frequently among commuters and is also something Madhabi herself may have done in the past. Madhabi had also, on numerous occasions, spoken about the significant number of women travelling to work in the city, noting that the crowd was 'much bigger than before'; she was, then, arguably aware of her own dispensability and that by taking leave – pre-arranged or not – she was taking a serious risk, rendering herself open to being replaced by the *badli* or indeed one of the hundreds of other women who were ready at any given moment to step in and take her place (see also Roy, 2003: 84; Ray & Qayum, 2010: 90).

Although new or relatively new workers are particularly vulnerable to being replaced, long-standing employees can also face this threat, particularly if they ask for pay increases and/or leave. Madhabi had been working for her employer for a year when she took leave to visit Haridwar, and Charu had been in a job for sixteen years when, after asking for a small increase in pay, her employers told her to leave.

The household where I used to work, they had small children and there were lots of incidents. I had at first told them about this flat. I found out about it and told them. At the time, I was foolish and didn't know much. They paid me Rs.300 for this, for finding the flat for them. The man of the house, for all the time I worked there, he never yelled at me, but the woman, she's a big... [pause]. She would make me work a lot, cleaning and cooking. For all of this work, I would get Rs.950 and when I asked for Rs.100 more, they said "you don't have to work here." She'd make me work a lot and wouldn't pay me enough. She created trouble about me asking for more and told me to leave so I left (Charu, 16.05.2015).

Like Ruksana, Charu had, it seems, taken on an increasingly heavy workload during the sixteen years she had worked for this family – again, without an increase in pay. She had also done various kinds of work in this house, and, as her account indicates, she had had to put up not only with a perpetually dissatisfied and nagging *boudi* but also the behaviour of her children. Charu had, moreover, gone out of her way to help this family, indeed helping them to find the flat where they lived and accepting what she later regarded as a rather paltry sum for this help. She was, more generally, hurt

and dismayed when, after asking for a small increase in pay, her employer told her to leave.

Considering that commuters often lack the networks other, city-dwelling workers have and that job insecurity is one of the foremost issues affecting them in relation to work, agencies are important, providing a route into what is an intensely overcrowded market. Several of my participants (typically those doing care work) indeed worked through agencies; and many others had found work through agencies in the past, often working longer hours and earning more money as a result. As we saw in Chapter 4, however, while agency work has its benefits (for those who can do it), it nevertheless involves a similar problem of turnover. It guarantees neither uninterrupted income nor familiarity with employers – both of which are important to workers.

Agency & Resistance

As we have seen, workers' bargaining power is, generally very limited, and their attempts at negotiating with employers frequently fail, in many cases leading to the breakdown of the employment relationship. Opportunities for cooperation between workers are also extremely limited: in gated complexes, security measures *actively prevent* workers from entering in groups and engaging in any kind of collective action – 'We can't go there and fight with them. They won't allow it – they won't even let us past the gate' (Namita, 30.11.2015); and workers are, as we have seen, also often expected to work intensively in employers' homes, without interacting with others (see also Sen & Sengupta: 2016: 129). Moreover, on rare occasions when workers *do* get together with others to negotiate with or challenge employers – for instance, returning to employers' homes after working hours – these confrontations often spiral out of control, causing *more* problems for workers (Dey, 2017; Dhillon, 2017). There is, in addition, a distinct lack of occupational identity and community among workers – at least in the space of the workplace – which similarly limits opportunities for cooperation and collective bargaining. Namita was in fact the only woman to speak about traditional workers' rights strategies, remarking that strike action would perhaps teach the residents in her complex 'a lesson'; she was also herself sceptical about the chances of such a strike ever taking place. She knew only a handful of others who

worked in this complex – mostly fellow commuters – and she reiterated that the residents, their employers, were powerful and not be argued with. ‘Whatever the rules are, because they are ‘high society’ people, we have to follow’ (Namita, 30.11.2015).

Having said this, workers are not passive victims or willing supplicants to employers’ desires and whims; workers’ accounts brim with examples of agency and small acts of resistance (Scott, 1990; Jeffery, 1998; Mahmood, 2001), which help them to not only bear the structural burdens of commuting and domestic work (Roy, 2003: 199), but also pursue their own interests and goals (see also Ozyegin, 2001: 150). As already noted, commuters distinguish between their ‘own’ and their working lives, generally emphasising their domestic roles as wives and mothers – something which arguably helps them to transcend the class/caste associations of domestic work and to more generally preserve dignity (see also Dill, 1988: 37-43). As we have also seen, in cases where workers are treated as *kaajer lok* by employers, workers also ‘switch off’, doing tasks quickly and mechanically, and doing only those tasks which are required and nothing more (see also Romero, 1988: 330). Speaking of the home where she worked for only 40 minutes each day, and where there was a rather stale atmosphere between her and her employers, Madhumita said: ‘If one treats me as *kaajer lok* and does not interact [with me] or ask about my wellbeing then we also feel like just doing and completing our work and leaving’ (02.06.2015).

Purnima too expressed this sentiment, after noting how some employers follow her about and tell her not to touch things: ‘I have to work so it hardly matters what they think about me. Our need is money. We are just bothered about money. There is a swing in one house and there was a sari on it, trailing on the floor. Normally I would move this but I just left it there, and cleaned the floor around it’ (27.04.2015). I initially read this story and Purnima’s decision to leave the sari trailing on the floor, as a reflection of her anger and bitterness towards her employer; it was only later, after revisiting my notes and listening again to the recording, that I picked up on the humour and light-heartedness in Purnima’s voice as she recounted this story. Purnima had in fact been laughing and joking for most of our conversation, and this story too had been recounted in a tone of humour, arguably to underline how little she cared about her work and her employer in this house – humour/joking being, as we saw in Chapter 2, a common coping strategy for domestic workers (Constable, 1997: 174-179; Goldstein, 2003). I also did not, at first, understand the inferences about leaving the

sari to trail on the floor; it was only once I had discussed this with Basudha, Sohini and others that I came to understand that this could have been an act of subtle defiance and resistance on Purnima's part – particularly as leaving personal belongings on the floor, or touching the floor, is generally considered inauspicious in Bengali society (and across much of South Asia) and Purnima herself indicated that in other houses/situations, where she was treated with dignity and respect, she would have moved the sari. Purnima was, then, arguably making a statement by leaving the sari where it was, and in turn preserving dignity in a context of indignity. Moreover, by doing only what was required and nothing more, Purnima was perhaps able to conserve valuable physical and emotional energy which she could in turn invest more wisely – that is, in jobs and relationships where she was treated with respect and where she also had a (better) chance of gaining important non-wage benefits.

Additionally, as Namita indicated when talking about the complex where she worked, workers sometimes steal from employers – usually small items, such as food and clothing (see also Ozyegin, 2001: 147) – and they also talk back, challenging employers over pay and leave and so on. As we saw with Anjali's account, workers strategically manage the way they are perceived in employers' homes, seeking to induce feelings of sympathy and guilt in employers (see also Ozyegin, 2001: 146); they similarly manage their *own* emotions, biting their tongues or in other ways repressing feelings of anger and resentment (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 90), which are sometimes then channelled into more productive outlets. Supriya, an elderly woman who had long since given up domestic work, explained how she used to remain silent if her employers were angry with her; she would swallow her own anger, waiting until she and her employers had calmed down before trying to resolve the issue.

When they're angry, I don't speak with them – I wait until afterwards. Otherwise we'd get into an argument. If they say five, I'll say six and it will go like that. If anyone gets angry with you, in the house or anywhere, you need to stay quiet and talk to them later. Then you can say, "What was the problem?" Then they might realise they've done something bad (Supriya, 25.11.2015).

Supriya also explained how she used to employ 'sweet talk' with her employers – just as employers often employ sweet talk with workers – to bring them around to her way of thinking. 'If someone talks sweetly, people listen' (25.11.2015); while Madhabi

explained how she and others had become 'clever' (*chhalak*) in dealing with employers, and how, since learning to tell the time (something which, she realised, was necessary when she first started working in the city), she has been able to push back against employers' requests for more and more work.

If they try to make me work harder, I won't do it. We have had to become clever. When we started, older women used to say to us, "You are working in only two houses and we work in ten and we can still catch the 2pm train but you can't, why? You've got to be quicker and don't listen to them too much. Just see the clock and go and come out on time." When we come late, you complain to us so now we're also complaining when you make us late for our trains. If they ask us to do more work, we ask for more money (Madhabi, 22.01.2016).

Madhabi also admitted to sometimes lying to her employers about train delays so that she could take on bits and pieces of work in other people's homes: 'If I've reached there on time but someone else asks me to do some washing-up for them and they'll pay me Rs.20 for it, I'll do it and then tell the others that my train was late. They'll call me, to ask where I am, and I'll say, "Wait, I'm coming. My train was late" [laughing]' (22.01.2016).

The act of demanding/taking time off, or simply not turning up to work is another sign of workers' agency and resistance. A middle-class acquaintance in the city once reflected that it is in fact in such moments – when a 'maid' fails to show up for work – that one's dependence on them is most keenly felt: 'As an employer, you will always feel that you have no rights and they are calling the shots. They can just not turn up one day and you're left waiting' (09.10.2015). Even though workers frequently come to terms with low wages, low increments, and hardly any extra payment for extra work, they are particularly adamant about taking time off from work, rejecting the pressure for uninterrupted service on moral and humanitarian grounds (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 124). As we also saw in Chapter 5, workers are starting to mobilise on and through the commute and, given that workers do not always know one another in the communities where they live and opportunities for cooperation in the workplace are generally very limited, it is these networks and solidarities – which are forged in stations and on trains – that arguably provide the greatest source of hope for workers in terms of organising for better work.

Conclusion

Commuters are among the most autonomous, as well as the most insecure of the various categories of domestic workers in Kolkata. This not only helps to explain the contradictions and ambivalences in their accounts, but is also in keeping with findings from other parts of the world where increased flexibility has meant increased insecurity for many workers (see, for instance, Hu, 2011; Standing, 2014; Alberti *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, while commuters reject servant imagery, describing their work in terms of *kaaj* and embracing elements of more transactional relationships with employers, they at the same time reject the label of *kaajer lok*, resenting employers who fail to provide non-wage benefits and forms of care. Like other live-out workers, commuters value close, familial-like relationships with employers, in part, because of the important non-wage benefits such relationships can bring, but also because these benefits and relationships confer a level of protection, stability, and dignity to workers, which is important given the continuing lack of formal rights and protections, the persisting class/caste connotations of this work, and the broader context of increasing competition and insecurity. In more transactional arrangements, as we have seen, workers are often expected to carry out their work quickly and mechanically; they are also often rushed and scolded by employers who show little understanding of the wider realities of their lives. Moreover, workers continue to be subject to avoidance behaviour as well as close monitoring by employers. In this context, then, offerings of food and drink or small gifts help workers to feel *more like* employers, or their kin, and it is precisely this recognition – that they too are ‘persons who feel and suffer’ – which workers miss and crave (Ray and Qayum, 2010: 103). Furthermore, as we have seen in other chapters, flexibility is particularly important to commuters and it these close, trusting, familial-like relationships which offer workers the greatest flexibility to negotiate leave and other benefits. Essentially, what workers desire are relationships where, if they are one day unable to turn up to work (because of sickness etc.), they will be given the benefit of doubt.

Because of the high degree of dismissal and turnover in the sector, however, opportunities for forming close, familial-like relationships with employers are increasingly hard to come by. New workers are particularly vulnerable to being replaced, but long-standing workers can also face this threat, particularly if they ask for leave or an increase in pay. As we have seen, workers sometimes leave jobs they

are dissatisfied with; long-standing relationships are valued by workers, but only in cases where there is reciprocity with employers. In many cases, however, workers feel, for various reasons, that they must stay and 'adjust'. Older workers and Muslim workers face a particularly difficult set of constraints, as do single mothers and those with health issues: these workers' accounts highlight the complexities and compromises, as well as the shifting priorities and concerns that shape their decisions to stay. For commuters, more generally, the decision to leave a job is risky; there is intense competition for jobs in the neighbourhoods where they work and this competition renders commuters (and other workers) vulnerable to undercutting and replacement, particularly during periods of leave/absence. While agencies offer some form of a solution, providing a route into what is an incredibly overcrowded and cutthroat market, agency work nevertheless involves a similar problem of turnover.

In line with Sen and Sengupta's work, then, the more general picture that emerges from commuters' accounts is one of intense pragmatism and negotiation, the employment relationship commuters describe fitting more closely with ideas of 'contract' than ideas of 'servitude'. The high degree of turnover is, as noted, in part caused by workers walking out on employers, and workers' accounts also contain various examples of agency and low-level resistance – including humour, talking back, and demanding time off. Even in cases where workers decide to stay and 'adjust', and where their accounts speak to feudal notions of loyalty and dependence, the decision to stay cannot be read (only) as an indication of workers' dependence and powerlessness, but rather as a testimony to the pragmatism of commuters who engage in 'intimacy work', striving and often succeeding to make the best of a bad situation. Indeed, given the absence of formal rights and protections and the degree of turnover in live-out/part-time work, it is these steady and stable relationships which appear to offer workers the best hope of gaining at least some level of protection and dignity. The chapter has more generally shown how the experience of commuting does not simply end when workers arrive on employers' doorsteps, and how issues of time and rushing are at the heart of the experience of commuting for domestic work. In the next chapter, we shall see how commuters also rush to get home at the end of the working day – not only because of their *own* domestic labour, but also because of ideas about women's mobility and 'honour'.

Chapter Seven: Getting Home from Work

Yesterday Sohini and I bumped into Shobna and Bijoy at the auto stand near Sonarpur station. We'd been planning to meet Shobna's sister-in-law, Priya (who lives next door to Shobna) but Shobna told us that she was still away visiting her parents. She anyway invited us to go with her back to the village and so the four of us clambered into the back of a *toto* (large auto-rickshaw), arriving at Shobna's village around fifteen minutes later. Sohini and I were struck by the transformation since our last visit (a few months ago, during the rainy season) and stopped for a moment beside one of the remaining pools of water; however, Shobna was keen to keep going and so the three of us – Bijoy had run off ahead – continued quickly down the path. It was not until we were sitting outside Shobna's house that she explained that she was running late: she had had to miss her usual train and wait for the next one as it was too busy to get on with Bijoy. We talked for a while about the difficulty of commuting with young kids, and about her employers; but Shobna became increasingly preoccupied, losing track of the conversation and pausing intermittently to supervise Bijoy who was busy transferring a handful of small, silver fish from one plastic container to another. 'He's changing the water,' Shobna explained. 'We'll eat the fish later tonight.' Between the meal that Shobna was evidently yet to prepare and the soapy clothes that were soaking in buckets, ready to be rinsed, we sensed that we were about to overstay our welcome and told Shobna that we'd visit again soon. She walked us to the gate, and I asked what she would do after we had gone, what she usually does in the afternoon. 'There is always a lot of work. I can never finish it all,' she replied wearily, confirming what I had thought (field notes, 13.12.2015).

This chapter extends the discussion on time intensification and rushing, focusing on women's personal lives and relationships and addressing two of the research questions outlined in Chapter 1: *How do commuters manage their unpaid work at home?* And, *What do commuters' husbands and families think about their work, and how do commuters manage their work in the city given ideas about women's 'honour'?* As the above excerpt illustrates, commuters experience a heavy burden of unpaid domestic labour, which they often struggle to combine with paid work and commuting, the net result being intense time and labour pressure and constant rushing. There are some instances of men helping to alleviate this burden; however, in line with global trends, women and girls do the lion's share, the daily routine for most commuters blurring into a hurried and thankless cycle of cooking, cleaning and looking after others. In addition, women must negotiate dominant ideas about women's 'honour' and 'respectability', carefully managing the stigma around women's work and mobility and guarding against suspicion and surveillance from husbands, sons and

neighbours. More broadly, then, this chapter builds on work by Shalini Grover (2011), Clarinda Still (2014) and others, illustrating that poor, working-class and Dalit women do not, as earlier research suggested, transcend the norms of 'proper' feminine conduct associated with middle/upper-class and high-caste women (see, for instance, Searle-Chatterjee, 1981; Deliège, 1997; Parry, 2001), but rather negotiate these norms day-to-day, sometimes challenging the structures of subordination in their own and others' lives, while at other times enacting and reproducing these structures. The first half of the chapter focuses on commuters' accounts of unpaid domestic and care labour, finishing with a discussion about cooperation within marriage; the second half discusses issues of 'honour' and 'respectability' and how commuters manage and negotiate violence in their homes and communities.

Women's Own Domestic Labour

There is a substantial body of literature illustrating that women's employment does not alleviate the burden of women's unpaid domestic labour but rather leads to a 'second shift' (Hochschild, 2003 [1989]) and thus an intensification of women's time and labour (Moore, 1992; Casinowsky, 2013; Chopra & Zambelli, 2017). In most contexts, women do the greater share of domestic and care labour in their households; and, even when men participate in this work, a gendered division of tasks remains: care-giving, for example, is generally the responsibility of women (Charmes, 2015). These differences are closely tied to ideas about gender identity and gender roles, and they appear particularly stark in working-class households; men with the fewest resources (i.e. unemployed men or those earning less than their wives/partners) often perform the least amount of household/care labour (Hochschild, 2003 [1989]; Grover, 2011). While both men and women frequently report a squeeze on time in line with a more general perception about the acceleration of daily life (Hochschild, 2001; Southerton, 2003; Wajcman, 2008; Rosa, 2013), time poverty and time pressure is especially acute for women, particularly working mothers who juggle paid work with caregiving (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Wajcman, 2008). In addition, in low-income countries, the additional burden of having to travel long distances to work, and having to undertake time and labour intensive tasks such as collecting water and fuel, adds to this time pressure, resulting in poor and working-class women often having literally 'no time to rest' (Chopra & Zambelli, 2017). Domestic workers in India

fall into this category of time-poor women (Grover, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016); and commuters are, as we have seen, under severe pressure, their day-to-day experience being one of constant rushing and constant lateness – this, too, taking a serious toll on their health and wellbeing. While, then, women's domestic and care responsibilities often influence their decision to take up domestic work over other forms of employment, they nevertheless struggle to balance these competing demands, rushing to get to work in the city and rushing to get home again at the end of the working day. Furthermore, if workers are asked to stay late at work or their trains are delayed, this again contributes to time pressure.

Although commuters were often reluctant to talk about their own domestic labour, indeed often shifting the conversation to other topics, visits to their homes revealed an endless cycle of domestic drudgery and care work. Indeed, like others carrying out research on paid domestic work (Ozyegin, 2001: 154), I realised early on in fieldwork that the only way to talk to and spend time with commuters was to either meet them on the commute or visit them at home in late afternoon or early evening. If women were not late, there would sometimes be a small window before women started on their second shift, when they would be more relaxed and open to chatting with us; however, even then, women still often multi-tasked, talking to us as they chopped onions, stirred pots, or hung clothes out to dry. For those with young children, this time was often spent feeding them or getting them changed and ready for tuition. Even for Santi, who worked in only one house and who arrived back home earlier than many of the other women in the village (around 1.30pm), the afternoon and evening still went by in a flurry, the work of preparing and cooking the family meal (Santi cooked for her daughter and husband) and tending to her six-year-old daughter, Bina, taking up most of her time.

When we arrived at Santi's house a little after two-thirty, we found Santi outside washing and gutting some fish in the stream of the tube-well. We had a quick chat before Santi asked us to go inside with Supriya [her grandmother], telling us she'd be in in a minute. We did as she asked, sitting down with Supriya on the bed and chatting about what had been happening with Parichiti. After a few minutes, Santi re-appeared holding Bina's hand and immediately started to undress the girl who, we knew, was about to go for tuition. Santi picked out a bright-red puffy dress and was doing her best to get Bina to step into it but Bina was distracted by the cartoons glaring from the television behind her mother. I could see her poking her head over Santi's shoulder as Santi pulled the girl's limbs this way and that, eventually having

to tap Bina on the cheek to get her to hurry up. Once in the dress and hair smoothed, Santi got up from her knees and ran out of the room dragging Bina with her and shouting to us as she left the house that she'd be back soon. Twenty or so minutes later she again joined us, sitting down to eat what looked to be a late lunch; Bina, we assumed, had been safely delivered at her tutor's house. Santi sat cross-legged on the floor and, clearly ravenous, helped herself to the bowls of *aloo phulkoppi* (potato and cauliflower) that she had placed in front of her, joining in with our conversation between mouthfuls. She'd told us earlier that she usually only has time for a quick cup of *chaa* (tea) in the morning and so this was likely the first time she'd eaten – or indeed sat down – all day (field notes, 26.11.2015).

Madhumita was similarly wrapped up in the day-to-day needs of her daughters, who, like Bina, attended private tuition after school, as well as dance and art classes. The family's hectic schedule meant Madhumita was never in one place for long and indeed the few times we sat down properly to talk were on those rare occasions when the daily routine had been disrupted. One of these occasions was just after Puja, when Madhumita had returned from visiting relatives and had decided to skip taking her daughters to tuition so that she could catch up on housework. Sohini and I had planned to make a brief stop at Madhumita's house to give her daughters some gifts for Puja and had not expected to be invited inside; the last few times we had called Madhumita, she had in fact explained that she was too busy to meet. When she spotted us on the path near to her house, however, she called us over and told us to go inside, quickly hanging up the rest of her washing on the line. Her daughters were stirring from sleep on the small camper bed; I asked Madhumita if we should come back at another time, but she just laughed and asked the elder girl to fetch us each a glass of water. Madhumita then explained that we had been lucky to catch her, as, most days, she was out taking her daughters to tuition and so on: 'I had a lot of work so I told her, "Let me manage the housework for two or three days, then I'll take you for tuition again" [...] You have got us luckily [...] Usually the whole day our house is closed' (27.10.2015).

Madhumita, like many domestic workers, lived with only with her daughters and husband, who worked long hours as a private driver in Kolkata; her mother-in-law lived nearby but seemed to have little to do with the family, and so Madhumita was responsible for the bulk of the housework and childcare. She was, like many other mothers, happy to be able to provide for her children by working in the city, but this meant that she literally never stopped. To save time in the morning, she cooked at

night, preparing *tiffins* for her daughters, and, in the morning, waking them up with a quick drink of milk before getting them ready and out of the door for school. Due to the lack of (affordable) pre-prepared food and labour-saving appliances, family meals take a considerable amount of time to prepare. Madhumita was the only woman I knew with a fridge (and thus able to keep leftovers for longer) and like others she cooked with a kerosene stove (see Figure 4). Water and fuel collection also require time and energy, though, in some cases, men help with this 'outdoor' work. Furthermore, because cooking is associated with nurturing and motherhood (Delaney, 1991) – and motherhood is associated with women's identity (Ozyegin, 2001: 176; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 178-210) – it is important for women not be seen as compromising on cooking, particularly by husbands and particularly if they are engaged in paid work outside the home (see also Ozyegin, 2001: 176). The decision to cook at night was thus strategic on Madhumita's part, enabling her to save time in the morning while ensuring that her family was well-fed and happy.

Shobna, Santi, and Madhumita were young, healthy, and relatively financially stable (on account of their husbands' work); the drudgery of their lives was also somewhat offset by the joy and pride taken in their children. However, for other women – single mothers, older women, and those in a more precarious position – the daily routine was punishing and came with little respite and reward.

I take off my clothes and have a wash in the pond outside. If there is any food left, then I eat too. If there isn't I don't eat and just clean the rooms. Once it becomes dark I start to cook dinner and do a little worship. Then I go to sleep and get up again at 3.30am [...] It's lots of work – cleaning clothes, looking after the chickens and hens. I lock the cages for the night. Then there's cooking and doing worship. When I wake up in the morning, I also use cow dung and clay to clean the floor. If I'm late and cannot do it, my mother does it (Madhabi, 13.05.2015).

Although Madhabi's mother would sometimes help her to clean up if she was running late and her sons would also occasionally help by running errands and so on, Madhabi was responsible for most of the day-to-day work at home – cooking, collecting water/fuel, shopping for food, and washing clothes. Moreover, because Madhabi's house was slightly out of the way, shopping for groceries and collecting water took a considerable amount of time and energy; there was only one small shop near to her house, the only place to buy vegetables and other groceries being the main market

near the station – a good thirty-minute walk or a Rs.6 *gari* ride from Madhabi's house. Most days, Madhabi would stop at the market after getting down from the train; however, if she had forgotten something, she would have to make a second trip. Indeed, she often came with us back to the station after our visits, though we usually insisted on paying for a *gari*, aware that Madhabi had likely already walked miles earlier in the day. The tube-well was also a fifteen or so minute walk from Madhabi's house, meaning that, again, she had to walk to collect drinking water, before walking back with the heavy water-filled plastic containers: 'It's not easy to carry it from there to the house' (09.08.2015). Furthermore, as her account indicates, because of the difficulty in collecting water and carrying it home, she generally bathed and washed her clothes in the pond water behind her house, the work of washing clothes, as indicated already, being heavy and time-consuming.

As with commuting and everything else, women's work at home becomes yet more difficult during the rainy season. Shopping for groceries and collecting water and fuel takes longer than usual and entails wading through mud and filthy water; and then there is the struggle of finding clean drinking water given that tube wells often overflow and become contaminated. Santi was just about able to afford the daily Rs.40 can of clean drinking water her family needed and she also received some (free) additional drinking water from the government, explaining that local 'parties' offer free water in exchange for votes: 'It [water] comes from the government, but through "parties". A party comes and those who vote for them will get water' (30.11.2015). Others, however, could not afford to buy water and did not have voter ID cards so could not avail themselves of the free, government water – something which understandably outraged Santi: 'They're humans too – they should also be able to get water' (30.11.2015). Madhabi was one of the many who were forced to drink dirty, contaminated water from the tube-well and offered a searing critique:

The newspapers are constantly saying, "Don't drink water that's from the tube well. Drink only clean water," but what can we do? We have to survive on what's available around us. That's why so many people fall sick. None of the beds at the Baruipur hospital are empty, do you see? How difficult our lives are and how we are still surviving? Only God knows. People in Kolkata have filter water, clean water, but that's not for us. It's not like that here. For us, it's very difficult (*khub koshto hoy*) (09.08.2015)

Damage to women's homes also means housework is often the least of their concerns

during the rainy season. As we saw in Chapter 5, women's homes, which are often made partly out of mud, frequently collapse or suffer serious damage during periods of heavy rain, with women having to either abandon their homes or spend months repairing them. The day we were unexpectedly invited into Madhumita's house, she described the extent of the flooding her village had endured until a month or so earlier, telling us how she and her husband had had to elevate furniture using bricks and how she had kept the lights switched on for two months straight (that is, when the electricity was working) for fear of snakes and other animals coming into the house.

This entire area [inside the house] was filled with water, the 'veranda' too. My *didi* stays in lake gardens so we sent our daughters to stay there. Myself and my husband stayed back. The way through which you came here, it was flooded with this much of water [shows level with hands]. Our bathroom was flooded [...] How long can one stay in this dirty environment? Our health was being affected. During the monsoons, she [her daughter] had her exams [...] We used to spend our nights somehow and then we used to go for work in the morning [...] The water was there inside my house for three days. We had to lift the fridge up with bricks, same with the bed and other things [...] For two months I couldn't switch off the lights in our room. Snakes, frogs could come in, so we couldn't switch off the lights for two months [...] My neighbour told me they saw a poisonous snake behind my house (Madhumita, 27.10.2015).

As Madhumita indicates here, and indeed as discussed in previous chapters, life does not stop for commuters during periods of heavy rain; rather it becomes much more difficult. Madhumita's daughter still had to take her exams and Madhumita and her husband still had to go to work where, as we have seen, commuters often face little understanding from employers about transport delays and other such difficulties. What was also not said here but nevertheless clear from earlier conversations and visits to Madhumita's house was that Madhumita had also had to feed her family and take care of their needs during this period, this work too becoming incredibly difficult.

Marriage & Cooperation – Sharing the Burden?

Given the insecurity of men's work and the view put forth in some of the earlier literature on gender in India – that working-class and Dalit marriages are less hierarchical and more cooperative than upper class and high caste marriages (see, for instance, Searle-Chatterjee, 1981; Delière, 1997; Parry, 2001) – one of the questions I was most interested in exploring during fieldwork was to what extent

women's employment and men's un/under-employment had contributed to the sharing of household labour, and to a sense of cooperation between men and women. However, in line with Sen and Sengupta, I found that women and girls continue to do the lion's share of domestic and care work in commuters' homes (2016: 203-204), commuters' work in the city leading to increased time and labour pressure rather than helping to alleviate the burden of their own household labour. Admittedly, in some cases, there is a degree of sharing: Madhabi explained that her son, Bhola, would sometimes cook and run errands, while Santi mentioned that, after moving in with her parents (which enabled her to work longer hours as an *ayah* in the city), her father and brothers would help her mother to look after her daughter: 'She goes for tuition and school and now my mother can take her to school, or my brothers or father will. That way I can do '12 hours duty'. I'll get more money that way' (30.11.2015). There were, however, few cases of husbands helping with day-to-day cleaning and cooking work – even when they were at home during the day and thus, in theory, around to help.

Women's own ideas of marital harmony seem to have little to do with the sharing of household labour; rather they appear to be based on a clear separation of men's work ('running the household') and women's work (taking care of children, children's expenses, and housework). Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 4, commuters frequently insist that their earnings are supplementary to those of their husbands, even though in many cases their earnings appear to be integral to what they consider the work of running the household – paying for food, fuel, rent and so on. Typically, it is younger, relatively more financially-stable women who speak of balance and cooperation; however, sometimes women's husbands also present a picture of muddling through and working together, arguably because of their feelings of shame regarding their wives' work. During my first visit to Mithu's house, for instance, after we had talked on the journey about her work and how she had had to persuade her husband, Biswanath, to allow her to take up work, we had the chance to speak with Biswanath directly. Biswanath had stayed back from work to meet us, and when we turned the corner into their garden, he stood to greet us, handing Basudha and I each a woven fan and inviting us to sit on the plastic chairs next to him. It was still very hot in the shade of the overhead canopy and Mithu and Biswanath apologised intermittently for the lack of 'current' (electricity), which meant that we could not sit inside under the

fan. Once it started raining, however, Mithu led us inside to the bedroom – the only room in their house – where several photographs of their teenage daughter hung on the wall. We talked for a little while about their daughter, whom had recently married and moved away, before returning to the topic of Mithu's work. Mithu spoke at length about her employers and the accident she had suffered years earlier, and I wondered what Biswanath was thinking as he sat quietly listening to his wife describe these various hardships. Biswanath seemed gentle and more respectful than several of the other husbands I had encountered, who regularly interrupted their wives during our visits; but I also surmised from Mithu's earlier comments that Biswanath was likely feeling uncomfortable with the topic of conversation. Indeed, when I turned to ask him what he thought, he explained:

The fact that she is going to work hurts me (*dukho koshto lage*) but if she stayed back, she would be thinking, "If I go out, I would be able to work somewhere and earn some money." When she isn't working, I have to give her the money she needs. This is why we both work and earn together. Suppose one day she comes home late. I start cooking to help her. Suppose I have gone out somewhere and she does some of my work, like washing clothes. This is how we work together and run the household. If I was staying at home and sleeping away my time, she would feel angry... This is it. We both have love for each other. It is not that she spends her income on her wishes. She comes and tells me, "This happened" or "We need to buy that." I also say the same and this way we make our future better, safer. If we work together, we can pay off our debts. So that's why we do everything together (23.07.2015).

Biswanath was keen to emphasise the mutual support in their relationship, explaining how he helped Mithu around the house, cooking and washing clothes – the latter of which he even referred to as 'his' work' – and how they worked and made decisions together. Of course, research illustrates that men are more likely than women to inaccurately report the amount of housework they do (Hochschild, 2003 [1989]; Kan, 2008), and he may have also thought that the admission of cooperation would elicit a positive response from us. However, it is also likely, given Biswanath's feelings of hurt and shame, that he was trying to compensate for a sense of emasculation linked to his inability to provide. Indeed, after he said this about Mithu's work, he went on to talk about their insecurity and about the price of land. Mithu also did not validate Biswanath's account of cooperation and shared work, although she did not challenge it either; rather she listened intently to her husband, as he had earlier listened to her,

suggesting that she either agreed with what Biswanath was saying, or that she wished not to further injure her husband's pride and perhaps also avoid causing trouble for herself after we had left.

'Honour' and 'Respectability'

Part of the reason women have to persuade their husbands to allow them to work outside the home relates, as Ray and Qayum note, to the persistence of a breadwinner ideology which upholds men's role as providers (2010: 119-144). Commuters' accounts of patriarchal failure reflect, as we have seen, a longing for an 'idealized, patriarchal fantasy' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 144), or a 'utopian patriarchy' (Kumar, 1993: 125), where women remain in the private space of the home to be looked after by fathers, husbands and sons; and men, too, often subscribe to this ideology, experiencing shame when wives, daughters, and sisters are compelled by circumstance to take up paid work (Ray & Qayum, 2010: 119-144). Once women take up work, moreover, they must continually perform 'honour' and respectability, guarding against accusations of impropriety from husbands and sons (see also Grover, 2011) – something which is arguably heightened in the context of commuting, which involves traversing public space and encountering unknown men. Madhumita explained that she had to work at the 'balance' in her marriage, and at keeping her husband's trust: 'One thing is that since I am going out to work because you are unable to fend for my needs, you have to trust me. And because I am going out, I shouldn't also break your trust. When this 'adjustment' is there between the two, this is the important thing' (02.06.2015). Here again we see the word 'adjust', the notion of 'adjustment' in this context speaking to the persisting stigma around women's mobility, paid work, and sexuality.

There is a wider body of literature on poor, working-class, and Dalit women's marital relationships which helps to contextualise these ideas and attitudes. Grover's work on women sweepers in Delhi, for instance, shows how marital relationships acquire a different dynamic when wives take up employment outside the home, describing how in many cases women are met with paranoid enquiries from husbands and sometimes even followed around street corners and to bus stops as a 'test' of their loyalty (2011: 50). Such suspicion, Grover explains, results from the fact that women's waged work

is linked to the threat of extra-marital affairs, and thus to the subversion of men's authority (2011: 50). Working Dalit women are thought to be particularly susceptible to engaging in illicit sexual activity and relationships – an understanding which in turn renders them (particularly) vulnerable to harassment and abuse (Sariola, 2010: 25; Still, 2014: 95, 112); and suspicion is also associated with perceptions about certain forms of work, including domestic work, which entails working in the private space of other people's homes (Grover, 2011: 51). Still, for instance, found that while women's work in the fields was resented by both Dalit men and women in Andhra Pradesh because of the association between the fields and illicit sex,¹⁰⁴ domestic work was considered yet more shameful because of the historical association between Dalit women's labour in upper-caste households and sexual servitude (2014: 115). The situation is arguably somewhat different in Kolkata and West Bengal, where greater numbers of women are involved in domestic work and the labour is less stigmatised as a result; however, concerns about women's infidelity nevertheless persist due to ideas about women's sexuality – as 'dangerous, threatening, and uncontrollable' (Grover, 2011: 52; Still, 2014) – and the intimate nature of domestic work (Ozyegin, 2001: 50-53; Erman & Kara, 2018: 50-51).

Considering dominant ideas about women's sexuality, as well as the broader socio-economic context within which poor and Dalit women's work takes place, it is unsurprising that suspicion has been described as an ever-present feature of poor and Dalit women's personal lives. Such suspicion is, as Grover found, both easily aroused and frequently the basis of heated and violent exchanges between spouses (2011: 51; see also Geetha, 1998). Furthermore, over time distrust and violence relating to perceived breaches in women's conduct become normalised and tied to the construction of masculine identity, with many children espousing the view that their mothers 'deserve a beating' (Grover, 2011: 53-54). While, then, violence against women is a multifaceted phenomenon 'grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors' (Heise, 1998), it is also in this context connected to a broader crisis of masculinity, which is in turn linked to high unemployment among poor and Dalit men and is also often manifest in, and exacerbated by, alcohol

¹⁰⁴ Still explains that this association stems partly from the fact that the fields are one of the few spaces where affairs can be conducted (2014: 115), but it is also likely connected to caste-based sexual violence which also takes place in these fields (Yeshwantrao, 2008; Biswas, 2014).

consumption (Moore, 1994; Grover, 2011; Still, 2014). As Henrietta Moore (1994: 154) writes: 'The inability to maintain the fantasy of power triggers a crisis in the fantasy of identity, and violence is a means of resolving this crisis because it acts to reconfirm the nature of a masculinity otherwise denied.'

The literature outlined here, while based on research conducted in other parts of India, is of great value to my own research, where themes of suspicion and surveillance similarly emerged in women's accounts, often linked to the temporal issues around commuting identified in Chapter 5. Shobna, for instance, explained how a woman in her village had fled her husband after suffering abuse for several years.

She used to come home late, because it's not possible to be on time every day. Suppose we have to use different transport or if your husband reaches home early – he'll complain about you not being there or being there by a certain time. She'll say, 'I missed the train because it was too busy,' or 'I had some extra work,' but they say, 'You have to come home by this time,' and he beats her up. That's why she left him (12.12.2015).

Santi too talked openly about men's suspicion and violence, even once advising me – albeit half in jest – never to get married. Like Shobna, Santi had known women who had left their husbands because of abuse and she had also known others who had stayed, in many cases because they had simply had nowhere else to go. Speaking about her friend's situation, Santi became irate:

It might happen that the train is late but your husband doesn't believe you when you tell him. He will come home drunk and beat you up. Now tell me, after a day's work when I feel like resting, is it fair that he comes home and beats me up? At 8pm I finish work, then I leave that house and it takes an hour after that to reach home. Then I have to cook. So you do all of this and still you're beaten up? What is the point of this kind of life? (25.11.2015).

Shobna and Santi were angry and frustrated with the situation many women found themselves in, their accounts underlining the injustice of women being punished for circumstances they have little control over. Santi also underscored the unfairness of women's lives more broadly, noting the long working hours, the burden of their domestic labour, and the problem of men's drinking and violence. Rather than being thanked for their hard work – which, as we have seen, in many cases keeps families going – women are instead mistrusted and 'beaten up'; indeed, Santi asks, 'What is the point of this life?' Santi was insistent that her own marriage was good (*bhalo*);

however, given the broader context of suspicion, the general terms with which she spoke about men's violence, and indeed her evident anger when doing so, it is certainly possible that these issues affected her – Santi's unwillingness to discuss them may have been a reflection of the strength of the stigma around women's sexuality (and the idea that women bring violence upon themselves). Indeed, when I asked Santi if moving in with her parents would help to prevent problems from arising with her husband, she said: 'Yes, obviously. He won't ask me for explanations because my mother and father are here. If I come back home late, my mother would know why also' (25.11.2015). Later in the conversation, she also spoke about the need for 'adjustment' within marriage, noting: 'We fight everyday but I can "adjust". Even in my workplace, there's no problem. I can "adjust" there too. You need to be able to "adjust". If you can "adjust", then you'll do well' (25.11.2015). As will be illustrated later, the need to 'adjust' within marriage, and to encourage trust with husbands, is particularly important for women given the 'immoral' status that is attached to single women (particularly *poor* single women) in India and the difficulties entailed in finding accommodation without a husband, brother, or father (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 79).

Priya reported that women *do* sometimes engage in extra-marital relationships, suggesting that, in these cases at least, women give their husbands reason to 'doubt' (*sandeho kora*).

Lauren: I've heard a lot of women face trouble with their husbands for going out to work. Why do you think this happens?

Priya: It's not like that for me. These people suffer from doubt. For example, someone's wife has gone out for work and was seen talking with someone. But for our work, we have to talk with people, security guards (*dharwan*), 'drivers'. 'Drivers' might ask us, 'Is dada at home?' or 'Has dada taken a bath yet?' so they know if they should offer tea. Sometimes we also meet them on the roads and stop to talk. Some husbands doubt because of this. Once it's in their head, it stays (*mone modhe paap dukhe jai*). We might also come home late – the train may not be running, so they beat you. Do you know Aarati? She stays nearby and her husband breaks things, like the almirah. Shobna's husband and my husband aren't like that. Now it's easier for us too because we have 'phones'. If I'm getting late, I can tell them.

Lauren: But why do they doubt so much do you think?

Priya: It's not only boys that are bad. Girls can be bad also. If you think that we girls are good, it's not like that. There are some who take the wrong path, fall in love (*amader modhe kichu meye ra baje line e chole jaye, hoyeto prem hoe jaye*).

Sohini: But it seems like men doubt women even when they're not doing anything.

Priya: It comes into their mind because, suppose your wife is having an affair and you share this with your friend. That other man might also start thinking his wife is doing this. They drink and then start to think these things, start doubting their wives. Aarati, she's the second wife, so men who are like that, who marry twice are more like this. My daughter is married so it won't happen with us. This doubt isn't there between us.

Sohini: Because you've been married a long time?

Priya: Yes. We've been running this family together and we have trust. But this trust can break down with someone who does something wrong. Even if you don't do anything wrong again, the fact that you once did makes people keep doubting you.

Sohini: But there are women who never have affairs and their husbands still doubt them...

Priya: They might not have but there must be something to make them doubt. He might follow her and see that she's coming from Sonarpur with another man, so the husband sees this and then their relationship starts to break down. In poor families, these things happen more and more. Actually, in wealthy families too, you can see in 'offices'. Suppose my husband is not earning much and can't give me jewellery, he's unable to take me out for 'touring' – I'm talking about rich people (*boro lok*). Then you will see that they start talking about 'divorce' and starting new relationships. But for us, poor families, we never talk about 'divorce'. You know what happens in our case? We can't 'divorce' because we're not registered as married couples. So if a man is torturing his wife, she will just pack up her things and run away – sometimes with the man she's been having an affair with. This is what happens in our case. The woman can never come back. She has to settle somewhere else. But in your case, especially amongst 'high quality' people, they openly 'divorce'. Once they're in a flat, they close the door and you never know who is inside with that person (18.01.2016).

As with other women's accounts of marriage, Priya's is rather contradictory. Priya insists that her own and Shobna's marriages were fine, that their husbands were not like other husbands; however, she also explains that having a mobile phone helps to prevent problems from arising between husbands and wives, noting that if she is late, she can call her husband to assuage any 'doubts' he might have as to her whereabouts. She also touches upon the inevitability of coming into contact with other men – through commuting and through domestic work – reflecting on the unfair nature of accusations about women's impropriety in this context, while at the same time distinguishing between 'good' women who interact with men only insofar as their work and travel demands it and 'bad' women who pursue romantic and sexual relationships with other men. Priya in fact intimates that men and women are *equally* as likely to engage in extra-marital relationships, although she also acknowledges that the costs

of 'taking the wrong path' are higher for women: 'even if you don't do anything wrong again, the fact that you once did makes people keep "doubting" you'. That women must, as Priya outlines, generally abscond with their lovers or otherwise leave their communities after engaging in illicit relationships illustrates the double standard to which women are held, and, furthermore, that a woman's honour 'can hardly ever be retrieved' once lost (Sariola, 2010: 120; Grover, 2011; Still, 2014). The following two accounts explore these themes in greater detail, illustrating how women who are seen to particularly violate the norms of 'proper' feminine conduct – that is, women who not only go out to work but who in other ways do not conform to the idea of the 'good', 'respectable' woman – and who are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse, experience and negotiate this violence and abuse in their day-to-day lives.

Madhabi's Story

Although Madhabi was married, she lived, as noted earlier, with only her two sons and elderly mother; her husband, Somnath, had left several years earlier to live with another woman and her children, in a house not far from that which he had shared with Madhabi and where Madhabi, her sons, and elderly mother continued to live when I knew them. Madhabi had learned to fend for herself and her family over the years (as noted in Chapter 4, she had started working shortly after Somnath's departure), but she had also learned how to live as a single woman in her community – something which involved the constant management of speculation about her character as well as surveillance at the hands of other women.

People say, "She must be having an affair. Otherwise how can she build a house like that?" But everything comes from God's wish and my strength of mind. The women think I'm trying to steal their husbands – all because I don't live with my husband. I say to them, "I'm not doing anything. If I wanted to start some romance, I would do it outside, in Kolkata. I'd find a man there who has money!" Sometimes I fight with them. It's a way of life. Why do they say I'm a bad woman (*kharap mahila*)? Just because I have to go out of the house to work and I talk to people on the way. These people – the women especially – they come to check where I am, what I'm doing, if I'm back after work. And if I'm late, a lot of the time I stay late at work, they say to my son, "What is taking your mother so long to come home? Why hasn't she returned yet?" If they see me chatting with you, they'll think I'm involved in something. If someone hears me talking on the phone, they'll think I'm having an affair. If I don't talk to these women, they come to find me and ask me where I've been. I say to them, "It's my business," but if I don't answer them [properly], they

say I'm dumb (*boka*). Also, if I speak, they say I'm crazy (*pagol*). You tell me, how should I behave? (20.05.2015).

The relentless suspicion and surveillance described here confirms that women are sometimes 'instrumental in enforcing those values which ultimately restrict them' (Still, 2014: 202). Like other women, Madhabi was forced to justify to her neighbours and community her work in the city, and the fact that, through her work and commute, she regularly encountered and spoke with unknown people/men – this unrestricted mobility and contact with unknown men heightening, as we have seen, existing fears around women's mobility and sexuality. These issues were also compounded in Madhabi's case since she was a single woman who was anyway perceived as lacking in 'respectability' and thus considered *even more* likely to engage in illicit sexual activity. As Madhu Kishwar (1999: 227) explains, women fear and expect that their husbands will stray, and they also believe that independent and 'available' women make it easier for them to do so. Such an understanding of single women – as a 'danger' and 'temptation' – reflects the dominant discourse about women's sexuality outlined earlier and was also something Madhabi herself reproduced when talking about Somnath's second wife, whom she held responsible for Somnath's desertion. 'Actually he [Somnath] is good. It is that woman who is wicked (*bodmash*). He says, "I can't come and see you because she doesn't allow it. She scolds me if I talk to you"' (20.05.2015). That Madhabi blamed the 'other woman' for the breakdown of her marriage illustrates a wider point about the higher moral responsibility women must contend with (compared to men). Women, as Still writes, 'are responsible not only for preventing their husbands from straying but also for refusing men who approach them' (2014: 179).

The extent to which Madhabi found herself the target of malicious village gossip may also have been tied to the fact that, following Somnath's departure, she had moved to a different area and begun a romantic relationship with a man she had met on the train. This man had helped her to rent a room, posing as her husband, and the pair had lived together for a time as husband and wife; however, Madhabi had later ended the relationship, worried about how her sons would view this man – and her – as they grew older.

Lauren: Do you think you will marry again? Does it happen that women marry again, like men?

Madhabi: When my husband left, there was much pain in my heart (*amar mone khub koshto holo*) and I moved to another place and rented a room there. But my mother said, “How can you do this all alone? The rent alone is Rs.400, and you’re a woman.” There was a man, then – an unmarried man – who I used to see on the train. I used to talk to him and we became close (*moner mil holo*, literally, ‘our hearts met’). It helped me a lot to talk to him, and he put his name on the papers. You see, nobody was allowing me to stay alone. They told me I needed a man to settle somewhere, to sign the papers, so I asked him to do this favour for me. The place was nearby to the station and we stayed there for five months. Sometimes he also stayed with me, a few times in a month, just like my own husband. He used to call me *boudi* and I used to call him *thakur po*.¹⁰⁵ I wanted to make the relationship work but I knew it was bad, that my children would not accept it. Sometimes I thought, “My husband has gone his way, he lives as he pleases (*o moto o thak*), so I should also be allowed to choose my own path.” But I worried that my sons would not accept another man as their father and broke it off. Later, that man got married. His place is very far from here and we don’t talk. Going by train, I sometimes hear about him from other people. “How is he?” I say.

Lauren: Do you think that you’ll you try to meet someone else, have another relationship?

Madhabi: Sometimes I feel that I should find someone and be happy, [but] being with someone would cause trouble. I made a mistake (*bhul hoegechilo*), it was one time, and now my sons have grown up, I won’t do this again (20.05.2015).

Madhabi explains that at the time she had felt a level of injustice about the fact that she could not choose her ‘own path’, as Somnath had done, and that her relationship with this man inevitably had to come to an end; after all, continuing it would likely have meant that her sons would have grown up to resent her. Towards the end of her account, however, she draws a line under this earlier and, to her mind, foolish chapter of her life, describing the relationship as a ‘mistake’. On other occasions, too, Madhabi appeared keen to emphasise her new-found respectability; for example, later that same afternoon, she appeared to interpret my question about how she feels and behaves in the city as a reference to this former relationship and her character, replying curtly, ‘I don’t talk to men. Only once I made this mistake – I told you earlier. In the city, we work, but it’s not that we roam around with men’ (20.05.2015). Madhabi’s uncharacteristic defensiveness was likely the result of the fact that, at that point of the conversation, we had been joined by her son and another man whom she

¹⁰⁵ ‘*Thakur po*’ means ‘brother-in-law’ but is used more generally to politely address and refer to men.

addressed as elder brother (*dada*), but the example nevertheless illustrates that even those women who are largely resilient to suspicion and surveillance, and who often disrupt and challenge norms and expectations relating to ideas about women's 'honour', must also sometimes perform and uphold these norms and expectations.

Maintaining the appearance of respectability became increasingly important for Madhabi in the months that followed my early visits to her home, mainly on account of the fact that perceived breaches in her conduct were starting to have a worrying impact on her relationship with her two sons. While Madhabi was, as we have seen, frequently the target of gossip in her community, rumours about her conduct started to take on a new dimension in July 2015 after it emerged that Madhabi had been secretly meeting with Somnath in the fields behind her house. We had already known about Madhabi's ongoing relationship with Somnath – which she had revealed to us a month earlier – but we were unaware of the trouble this relationship had caused since our last visit and how, in the interim, Madhabi's eldest son, Bhola, had attempted to discipline his mother by beating her and locking her out of the house. Madhabi explained all of this soon after we had arrived at her house and found her talking quietly with her friend, Kabita, who, as noted in Chapter 3, had similarly been fighting with her family and had turned up on Madhabi's doorstep an hour or so earlier. I will return to Kabita's story later. For now, here are Madhabi's words:

There's been a lot of unrest, a lot of fighting and beating. I'd had to take the van one day and the van man [Somnath] came.¹⁰⁶ And then my son found out and we fought. If you hear what they're saying about me, you'll lose your mind. They're telling my son, "Your mother is a bad woman," and, hearing all of this, he started beating me. My son doesn't understand how much pain I have to go through every day. But he's hearing these things from people and just reacting like this. He says to me, "I'm grown up now. Why do you go out with that man? I have to hear things about you from people." I said to him, "If you think I'm bad, why don't you just lock me up at home?" [and then] he came at me with the *dhan chopra* [knife that is used to cut rice paddy]. Once, I also came home and saw that the door was locked. I said to him, "This is my house. How can you lock me out of my own house?" He also took away my SIM card. Then, for one week, I stopped eating at home. I would just go to Kolkata, come

¹⁰⁶ Madhabi clarified later, as we travelled back to the station together, that she had been speaking about Somnath but had been worried about what Bhola would do if he had heard her talking about him (Bhola had been wandering in and out of the house sheepishly). Somnath drove a 'van' (sometimes referred to as a '*gari*', meaning 'vehicle' or 'car') in the village – a local form of transport consisting of a motorbike with a wooden cart attached to the back for passengers.

back and go straight to sleep. That was a week ago [short pause]. Now I keep quiet and he keeps quiet. People have said to him, “You are her son. Why do you fight with her?” He’s been listening and I’ve said to him, “I just talk. Nobody has ever caught me doing anything like that.” I don’t have to listen to people who talk like this (09.07.2015).

Though Madhabi was somewhat sympathetic to Bhola who, she suggested, had simply been ‘reacting’ to the demands of others and thus fulfilling his masculine duty (in the absence of his father) by attempting to discipline his ‘wayward’ mother, she did not simply accept her son’s attempts to punish and control her. Instead, she fought back, at first verbally and later silently, by refusing to eat and cook at home – a strategy that has been documented elsewhere in India (Kishwar, 1999: 217) and which, as her account suggests, was more effective. Despite this defiance, however, Madhabi did in fact stop meeting with Somnath in the months that followed. Possibly, she had grown tired of the constant fighting in her life – fighting, which although ‘a way of life’, had nonetheless escalated after news emerged about her relationship with Somnath. In addition, Madhabi worried for her sons, and for Bhola in particular, who would have undoubtedly continued to bear some of the burden of the accusations about Madhabi’s ‘bad’ character if she had not taken steps to reverse this perception. By the time of my last visit in mid-February 2016, we did not mention Somnath, or Madhabi’s earlier liaisons with him; instead we chatted about Madhabi’s work and her youngest son who had a few days earlier been involved in a minor motorbike accident and who lay recovering on his mother’s bed as we talked. We also reminisced about the most recent Parichiti picnic, which had taken place a few weeks earlier and where Madhabi had danced for much of the afternoon, no doubt grateful for the chance to escape, at least momentarily, the suspicion and surveillance that engulfed much of her life in the village.

Kabita’s Story

Unlike Madhabi, who took up work only after Somnath deserted her, Kabita had been working in the city since she was a child, first doing *khawa-pora kaaj*, and later both *thike kaaj* and ‘patient care’. It was the live-in work she had done as an adult, however – after marriage, when her two sons were young – that was the cause of continual unrest in her home. When I met her that rainy July afternoon in Madhabi’s house, she explained that she had been fighting with her husband and sons almost continually

since she had returned to live with them five years earlier and that they continued to resent her for having left to go and work in Kolkata. Kabita's reasons for talking to us were, as noted in Chapter 3, unclear; but she was clearly desperate and, in her own words, 'without a solution' (*amar kache kono samadhan nei*).

I'm helpless. I don't have a solution. My parents and brothers are all dead and my husband is not a good man. He doesn't treat me well. [...] Even when my parents were alive, he used to misbehave. I cried so much and once I took him to the police station. In the middle of this, my third son died. I'm actually the mother of three sons... Six or eight years after we got married, I left and went to Kolkata. My *didi* found me some work and said to me, 'Don't wait for your husband to come around. Earn a living for yourself.' In Kolkata, I lived with a family and did *khawa-pora kaaj*; even before my marriage too, I used to stay there all day and night. Sometimes I would go to my sons' school to pay their fees or buy books for them. I also paid for their tuition. I'm their mother after all. When my mother became ill, I started doing *thike kaaj* so that I could look after her. Later, my mother died, and now I've been back with them [her husband and sons] for five years – they brought me back. I'm glad to have them with me again as we've been apart for so long and they're all I have. I try to look after them and protect them, but they misbehave with me. They say, 'Who are you? Where have you come from? Where was your husband then? Where was your family?' My sons use filthy language, just like their father. My husband doesn't want to live with me now and every day he's just beating me. He uses *tal gach* [palm tree branches] and kicks me on the neck. He also burns me with matchsticks. My eldest son, without telling me, also married a girl and brought her to the house. Now they have a four-year-old child. The way my son is with me, his wife is like that too. She's heard the way they talk to me and is the same. If I say one thing to her, she says twenty. [...] I've spent a lot of time in Kolkata. I'm spick and span (*ami chim-chan*). I try to teach her because she's young but she won't learn. One day I was so angry, I actually slapped her. Then I was hit so badly that I was lying in bed for three days. It was so painful. I couldn't go to work. I say to them, 'Why do you behave like this with me? Why did you bring me back here?' When my son says terrible things, I also say, 'What are you thinking? Just because I was not in the house when you were young, doesn't mean you run the place.' I say, 'You haven't got a good wife. She's a dirty girl.' The only time I got respect from them was when I left that *khawa-pora kaaj*. People make mistakes. They don't give me the respect of a mother. I've suffered a lot (*ami onek koshto shojjo korechi*). Now my youngest son, he's worse. He's beaten me recently. You've seen the marks. He calls me a prostitute (*magi besha bolbe*) but I don't stop giving him things. I gave them an LCD TV and I'll fix the roof on the house. I'm always working, and in spite of that my sons say such bad things. I'm beaten just because I speak up. What can I do though? Where will I go? This is the problem. When I told the party,¹⁰⁷ they said, 'It's a

¹⁰⁷ It was not clear which 'party' Kabita was referring to, but it is likely that it was a political party.

family matter. What can we do?' My sons are also complaining to the party, saying, 'Tell my mother to behave properly.' But I don't do that work anymore. Sometimes I work for twelve hours, but I never stay [overnight]. I don't talk to people. I don't even accept tea from people. And from afar, I've paid for everything. All I ever wanted – you don't even have to give me food – just a little respect. I feed them, and in return, I say, 'I have the money. I can feed you. Just give me a little respect' [...] After all this, they are still beating me on my shoulders. How much more can I bear? (09.07.2015).

Kabita's account touches upon an important theme in the literature on domestic work where the children of those employed to clean and care for families far away from their own report feelings of loss and abandonment and, in some cases, reject their mothers on their return (Hochschild, 2003: 16). Kabita's fraught relationship with her family was not simply the result of the fact that she had earlier left to work in the city, however; it also appeared to be linked to the aforementioned association between women's paid domestic labour – particularly that which is live-in – and extra-marital relationships. Kabita herself reinforced such ideas by later referring to this time in her life as a 'mistake' and by underlining her new-found respectability (as Madhabi also did): 'I don't do that work anymore. Sometimes I work for twelve hours, but I never stay [overnight].' Additionally, although Kabita's husband's lack of employment was never fully established, her status as the primary, if not sole earner in her household, may also help to explain her husband and sons' resentment and the regularity and ferocity with which they attempted to control and punish her. As Still highlights, the brute force to which men often resort to dominate their wives, may not only stem from the fact many women are taking on the breadwinner role and running their households in the absence of men's wages, but also because they are in many cases proficient at it (2014: 182).

While Kabita clearly regretted having left her family and undertaking *khawa-pora kaaj* in the city, she rejected the idea that she should be continually punished for having done so – especially considering that she had had very little choice *but to* leave and support herself and her family through live-in work in Kolkata. She also emphasises in her account the financial and material support she had provided for her family over the years, and the suffering she had endured as a result, positioning herself as a loving and dutiful mother who is worthy of 'respect' rather than the cruel and absentee one she was portrayed as by her family. Instead of receiving respect, however, Kabita was routinely insulted and abused by her husband, sons and daughter-in-law. In

addition, her eldest son had married and brought his wife to their house without informing Kabita – an arrangement which was arguably as shocking and hurtful to Kabita as it was ‘dishonourable’.¹⁰⁸

While Kabita’s story is undeniably one of great sadness and suffering, she was, as her account illustrates, far from passive and on several occasions attempted to change and improve her situation. Early on in her marriage, for example, Kabita sought help from the police, as she also did later from the ‘party’ (even though on both occasions her plea for help was ignored on the grounds that disputes between family members are ‘private matters’); and, after having worked away and then re-joined her family, she regularly challenged their behaviour – even if doing so meant having to face aggravated abuse. In addition, Kabita drew on her experience working in Kolkata, and her knowledge about cleanliness and hygiene, to critique and discredit her daughter-in-law (and possibly also her son for having married this woman without her approval), in the process re-asserting her authority as a mother and mother-in-law. And yet, while such efforts had perhaps enabled Kabita to cope with, and possibly also reduce, some of the oppression and violence she was experiencing (although her efforts clearly also sometimes had the opposite effect), overall her account suggests that her situation remained much the same: ‘After all this, they are still beating me on my shoulders. How much more can I bear?’

Introduced at the end of Kabita’s account, the issue of forbearance raises a difficult question that is often asked of women enduring abusive relationships: why stay? Kabita explained that she had been glad – at least at first – to have been ‘brought back’ by her family, since she had been separated from them for so long and they were, after all, ‘all she had’. She had also perhaps hoped, as her friend had earlier suggested might be the case, that her husband would ‘come around’ during the time she was away, and that her family’s view of her would similarly improve with time. However, even while continuing to harbour such hope, Kabita seemed aware of the unlikely possibility of such a turnaround taking place, herself later touching upon what was arguably the more important consideration behind her decision to stay: ‘What can I do though? Where will I go? This is the problem.’ As her friend’s experiences show,

¹⁰⁸ Sen and Sengupta explain that while ‘love marriages’ are not uncommon among the poor and working-class, and are sometimes even accepted by parents, the absence of the ‘social’ component (wedding, guests, and rituals) is nevertheless frowned upon (2016: 185-187).

the persisting association between unattached women and 'loose' morals makes it extremely difficult for single women to find accommodation in India (see also *BBC News*, 2014); and, as someone who had herself lived for a time without her husband in Kolkata – and indeed suffered the consequences ever since – it may have been not only the practical considerations but also the social costs entailed with living alone that preyed on Kabita's mind. In short, leaving may have been no better for Kabita.

Managing and Challenging Violence

The accounts of Madhabi and Kabita are in some way exceptional, both in terms of these women's particular circumstances and in terms of the extent to which they critiqued and challenged the injustice in their lives. At the same time, they shed light on what was a shared experience among the women in my study, all of whom experienced and negotiated everyday forms of oppression and violence – albeit in most cases to a lesser degree. Indeed, as the accounts of Santi, Shobna and Priya illustrate, *all* women must perform honour and respectability, guarding against accusations of impropriety and assuaging husbands' 'doubts'. The two accounts also speak to the shift that has taken place in research on women and gender in India in recent years, research which draws increasing attention to poor, working-class, and Dalit women's experiences and how these women too must negotiate norms and expectations relating to ideas about women's 'honour' and 'respectability'. Both Madhabi and Kabita were viewed and treated as 'bad' women in their homes and communities – a perception that stems largely from their work outside the home and the continuing association between women's autonomy and mobility and extra-marital/illicit relationships. For Madhabi, living as an unattached woman meant that accusations about her character, and the fighting they often caused, was 'a way of life' to be accepted and endured as well as sometimes challenged; while for Kabita the decision to leave her family and work in Kolkata when her sons were young was a 'mistake' for which she had long paid the price. The two accounts also show the double standards to which women are subjected. In Madhabi's account, Somnath appeared to face no consequences for his own 'errant' behaviour and in fact continued to live in the village with his second wife, doing what he pleased. Meanwhile, Kabita's son married in a manner that many would consider dishonourable and yet he too appeared to suffer no negative consequences; rather,

like Madhabi's son, he attempted to control and punish his mother for *her* conduct, thus fulfilling his masculine role. Such examples not only highlight the continuing significance of traditional gender roles and norms for women and men, but also illustrate that 'honour' is a malleable concept which is more frequently deployed to regulate the behaviour (and speech) of women rather than men.

In addition to demonstrating the ways in which women experience everyday forms of oppression and violence, the two accounts also show how women exercise agency even within contexts where they seemingly have little power, sometimes challenging and at other times developing strategies to endure and minimise the domination in their lives (see also Scott, 1990; Jeffery, 1998; Mahmood, 2001). Madhabi was in many ways the definition of the 'shameless' woman outlined in Still's work – loud, unselfconscious and unable to keep 'within her limits' (2014: 93-95) – and on two occasions entered into illicit relationships thereby transgressing norms and expectations associated with traditional domestic femininity. Kabita meanwhile sought help from the police when faced with persistent abuse from her husband, and when that too failed, she made the brave decision to flee, aware of the problems doing so would likely cause. Both women also consistently challenged those who abused them, speaking out about the injustices they faced and asserting their right to work and provide for their families without being judged and harassed.

In less direct ways too, Madhabi and Kabita resisted their neighbours' and families' attempts to punish and control them. After fighting with her son and failing to change his behaviour, Madhabi engaged in a silent form of protest, avoiding her son and refusing to cook and eat at home. Furthermore, towards the end of my fieldwork, Madhabi became more involved with Parichiti. Such women's networks are, as Still explains, opening up new ways to challenge patriarchal conventions in women's lives – particularly through the invocation of women's empowerment (2014: 184-205). Additionally, Kabita attempted to regain authority in her household by critiquing her daughter-in-law and by using knowledge from and about the city, particularly with respect to cleanliness and hygiene, to claim the moral high ground. Her account thus not only highlights the various 'low-profile' (Jeffery 1998: 222) ways in which women exercise agency within coercive contexts, but also illustrates how women's efforts to improve their own position can sometimes be to the detriment of other women, agency

being both 'self-destructive and exploitative as well as constructive and empowering' (Sariola, 2010: 136; see also Kandiyoti, 1988; Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996).

Although Madhabi and Kabita's efforts were sometimes effective in resisting and challenging oppression and violence, both women were nevertheless constrained by pressures to conform to ideas about women's 'honour' – as illustrated by their eagerness to sometimes appear 'respectable'. In these situations, Madhabi and Kabita rather drew on strategies for enduring and minimising oppression and violence, for instance, by invoking a broader discourse about women's pain and suffering (*koshto*) where hardship is understood as an integral part of the experience of being a woman (Still, 2014: 178; see also Egnor, 1980). In addition, Madhabi drew on the well-understood cultural narrative about misfortune and 'fate' (*kopale ja lekha ache*), which was somewhat at odds with her attempts to change and improve her situation but which nonetheless seemed to provide her with a source of comfort as well as perhaps a relatable framework within which to explain her circumstances to others. Additionally, both women emphasised their roles as mothers, seeking comfort and pride in the financial and material support they had been able to provide for their children through their work in the city.

Madhabi and Kabita also sought comfort in the emotional support and advice they were able to provide one another, illustrating that even in a climate of persistent and normalised violence, where women frequently condemn and cast aspersions about others, they also form friendships and networks which enable them to endure the hardships they are facing (Grover, 2011: 54; Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 214). Frequently, such relationships and networks are maintained through the use of mobile phones, as Madhabi herself explained: 'Sometimes I feel upset, being here by myself, so I call and talk to my friends, like I talk with you. We chit-chat. They say, "What's happening? Have you been to work today?" Things like this' (20.05.2015). Many other women also spoke about the benefits of having a mobile phone, both in terms of finding work and managing relationships with employers but also in terms of maintaining contact with family, friends, and natal kin; and while they sometimes also pointed to the *disadvantages* of being constantly reachable by phone (for instance, describing how employers and husbands frequently call them to check their whereabouts), most believed that the benefits of having a phone outweighed the costs. As Priya's earlier account demonstrated, among the most important of these benefits is that women

can keep in touch with husbands throughout the day, thus assuaging 'doubt' that may otherwise arise, though this, again, reinforces the norms of dutiful behaviour.

As the accounts of Madhabi, Kabita and others show, however, the fact that men often control women's access to phones, for instance by prohibiting them from having their own or by periodically confiscating their phone or SIM card, illustrates the extent to which women's phone use is perceived as suspicious and threatening by men. Assa Doron (2012: 425) explains that such distrust and suspicion arises, in part, because of fears relating to the flow of 'inside' information to the outside world, which in turn threatens the reputation and honour of the household (see also Dickey, 2000: 476). However, distrust also stems from the continuing association between women's autonomy and mobility (of which their mobile phone use is arguably both a symbol and an enabler) and illicit relationships, as well as from the fact that mobile phones *do* frequently enable men and women to discreetly forge romantic as well as other types of relationships (Doron, 2012: 418, 427-429).¹⁰⁹ Indeed, before the trouble with her son had escalated, Madhabi frequently talked with Somnath on the phone in front of us and once explained that when they used to meet in the fields behind her house, such meetings had first been arranged over the phone.

Although Madhabi's phone was evidently of considerable value to her – she carried it with her everywhere she went in a little zipped purse and replaced it each time it broke – she was keen to play this down when I asked her about it directly, indeed describing her phone as both 'important' and 'not that important'.

Lauren: Is it important having a phone?

Madhabi: It's important to me, yes. If I can't call my employer to tell them I can't go to work, then they are unhappy with me the next day. Yes, for example you called me today to say you were coming but if there was no phone how would I know? I can also speak to my friends [short pause]. But it's also not necessary that I have a phone. It's not like it is for you. I like having it, so I can call work and my friends. So, it's important but it's also not that important (20.05.2015).

The fact that Madhabi here gives the impression that she is somewhat indifferent to using her mobile phone, an impression which is quite at odds with the more general

¹⁰⁹ See also Juli Qermezi Huang's (2017) work on 'wrong-number' mobile-phone relationships in Bangladesh.

picture that emerged over the time we knew her, is significant and likely illustrates that Madhabi felt limited in what she could say. Just as Madhabi often backtracked during interviews when talking about her relationships with men, at once asserting her right to romantic relationships and ‘happiness’ while later regarding former relationships as ‘mistakes’, she was, then, similarly careful not to say too much about how she uses her phone in case we or others considered such uses ‘appropriate’. This, then, suggests that women not only police and discipline each other, but also themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the personal and home lives of commuting domestic workers, illustrating how they manage their heavy domestic burden – involving both paid and unpaid domestic labour – and how they negotiate a dominant discourse about ‘honour’ and ‘respectability’ while going out to work in the city. The analysis has demonstrated that despite the contribution of *some* men in *some* households, women remain responsible for the greater share of domestic and care labour within their homes, their heavy domestic burden being one of the chief reasons why they rush to reach home after work. Women must also contend with the stigma that is attached to women’s mobility, stemming from ideas about ‘honour’ and ‘respectability’, which frequently underlies a culture of suspicion and surveillance in their homes and communities.

The silences and inconsistencies in Madhabi and Kabita’s accounts are in many ways illustrative of the broader theme of this chapter, which has focused on the personal lives of women engaged in paid domestic work and commuting in West Bengal and which has demonstrated how even the most out-spoken and resilient of women must sometimes conform to pressures by performing norms and expectations relating to dominant ideas about women’s ‘honour’ and ‘respectability’. At the same time, the analysis has complicated traditional debates about gender relations and women’s employment in India, which have tended to either over-emphasise women’s autonomy or otherwise obscure it from view. Madhabi and Kabita’s accounts rather show that while women’s work in the city and the persisting association between women’s autonomy/mobility and illicit relationships underlies much of the oppression and

violence they experience at home and in the community, their autonomy and mobility also create possibilities for challenging and resisting this oppression and violence.

The next chapter similarly focuses on commuters' home lives, but shifts the focus slightly, to commuters' children and commuters' views about the future, offering a more hopeful narrative about aspiration and the promise of intergenerational upward social mobility.

Chapter Eight: Children, Childcare & the Future of Work

This chapter focuses on commuters' children and commuters' hopes and aspirations for a better future *for their children*, addressing the final research question, *How do commuters manage childcare responsibilities, and what do they want for their children?* As we have seen in earlier chapters, commuters often explain their work and lives in terms of providing for their children and children's futures, and they also seek jobs which allow them to spend as much time as possible *with* children, while also enabling them to pay for school fees and tuition. The choice of commuting, as opposed to living in the city, also often has much to do with children and children's futures, the decision to move out of the city in some cases being taken to give children a better life, including safe spaces to play and, in some cases, a sense of security through owning land and property. Children and children's futures are, in other words, at the heart of all commuters do and every decision they make; and while I did not anticipate having so much data on this topic – let alone enough to write a separate chapter – it is nevertheless a fitting point to end the thesis on. It is, after all, what is most important to commuters, and, unlike other chapters, this story is as much one of hope and optimism as it is one of hardship and suffering. The first part of the chapter discusses commuters' experiences of childcare and the fundamental tension involved in being a commuting mother, exploring how commuters' work, journeys, and a lack of access to (affordable) childcare services, makes it difficult for them to provide the forms of care they would like to provide for their children. The second half then discusses the narrative of 'investment' through which commuters often make sense of these struggles, looking at the promise of inter-generational upward social mobility through investment in children's education. As we will see, this investment is often significant, in terms of time, money and energy, particularly among the more financially-stable commuters who are able to earmark their earnings for this purpose; however, even those who struggle to make ends meet emphasise the importance of education, although in many cases this leads to marriage rather than educated employment for their children. While, then, there is hope and optimism with respect to commuters' children and the 'future of work', there is, again, much pragmatism.

The Struggle to Be There

One of the central paradoxes of paid domestic work, and indeed one of the most uncomfortable realisations for employers, is that in performing the reproductive labour of middle-class women, working-class women must sacrifice – at least some aspects of – caring for their own children (Cock, 1980; Glenn, 1992; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a; Romero, 2011: 21-47). Whether they are working abroad or in their own countries, domestic workers are generally unable to afford the kinds of paid childcare services for which they are often employed and, in many cases, they cannot rely on family either (Dill, 1980; Cock, 1980; Romero, 2011: 26). Middle-class women's motherhood, as scholars note, thus comes directly at the expense of working-class women's motherhood, domestic workers' children often being at a significant social and economic disadvantage compared to those of employers (Cock, 1980; Glenn, 1992; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003a; Romero, 2011: 21-47). In India, and indeed across South Asia, this paradox (which can, like commuting, also be understood as a form of structural violence) is apparent in the way 'middle-class women assert their claim to higher social status by devoting themselves exclusively to housewifery and motherhood, abjuring at the same time, the manual content of reproductive labour' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 148). Indeed, although working middle-class mothers typically withdraw from paid work when children are born, in line with dominant ideas about gender and motherhood, they also tend to employ domestic workers for the less desirable aspects of childcare, the management of domestic workers being a crucial task for middle-class mothers (Donner, 2006: 381-382).

Although domestic work affords women the flexibility to combine income generation with taking care of their homes and families – something which, as we have seen, often underlies their 'preference' for this kind of work – arranging care for children is nevertheless one of the most difficult parts of their lives. Childcare is a particularly key concern for those with young children and women generally withdraw from work following childbirth, staying at home for several years or until children are in school. Priya, who, as noted in Chapter 4, used to work for an agency, explained how she had had to leave this work when her son, Narayan, was born.

Lauren: Have you ever worked through a centre?

Priya: I worked for a centre for seven years, doing patient care. It was very difficult. Duty was for 12 hours so I had to stay out for 14 hours a day. From

8 until 8 I worked [...] I worked in Bagha Jatin, Park Circus, Mintu Park... You go out in the morning and come home late at night. It's a struggle (*khub koshto kore*). You come home late at night and can't even read to your children – at 9.30pm, they're already asleep. You can't spend time with them. That's why I used to work at night. I used to work all night and come home in the early morning. Then I'd start cooking, spend some time with my kids. During the night, my husband would look after them. I worked like that for seven years – night and day but mostly night shifts. But when my son was born, my husband didn't allow me to do it anymore. He said, "Don't do that work. You won't be able to look after him."

Lauren: Why did you start doing patient care, in the beginning? Was it for the money?

Priya: Yes. I did it, to be honest, because the wages are better and I could spend all day with my kids. That's how I raised them. Then my son was born. Before that I only had two daughters and I could take them to school and collect them again afterwards. My husband would meet us at the station and take the kids with him when I'd go to work.

Sohini: So, for seven years it was like this?

Priya: Yes, and then my son was born and my husband asked me to stop the 'duty'. The boy was small so he needed me at night. Later, I used to keep him with my mother sometimes when I'd go out for work in the morning (18.01.2016).

Although it was difficult for Priya and her husband to manage caring for their daughters, working in shifts and hardly ever seeing one another as a result, they had managed to keep this arrangement going for seven years, until Narayan was born. Narayan was their third and last child and, as Priya was keen to emphasise, she gave up working to care for him, something which she may also have done with her daughters but if not might indicate a preference for her son (discussed later). When Narayan was a bit older, Priya returned to work, at first for a few hours each morning while her mother looked after the boy and, once he was in school, juggling five different jobs – a combination of cooking and cleaning work. When I met Priya, her eldest daughter had recently married and thus her burden of caring had been alleviated slightly; however, even so, it was difficult for Priya to balance earning enough money to pay for her other two children's studies and having enough time to actually look after them. Sitting cross-legged on her bed, she told me that she was trying to cut down her cooking jobs as she often ended up burning her hands when she was rushing to finish her work so that she could take Narayan to school (he attended two schools in the city and went to private tuition in the village in the afternoons). She was, however, happy that her sacrifices were paying off and Narayan was doing well: 'I face problems but if a mother doesn't support their child,

they won't become a good person (*bhalo lok*). Since I've been doing all of this, he's come first in class. If I didn't make any effort and just left him to play, would he have done so well?' (18.01.2016).

Priya's sister-in-law, Shobna, had similarly struggled to care for her son, Bijoy, in the years immediately following his birth, when Shobna and her husband had first moved from their in-laws' home into their own rented home near Sonarpur. Shobna's husband had worked long hours at the time and her in-laws (with whom she and her husband had lived after their marriage), were rarely willing to help;¹¹⁰ her own parents had also passed away years earlier. A kind neighbour would sometimes come and relieve Shobna for a few hours, but, apart from that, she had had to manage by herself. 'After I was cut [referring to the umbilical cord], my in-laws sent me here and I took care of him. It was just me, I did everything.' (12.12.2015). Taking care of Bijoy was especially difficult for Shobna during the rainy season when their house would flood and snakes would come into the house: 'He [Bijoy] used to cry a lot and it was very difficult in that house when it rained' (12.12.2015). A snake had in fact once slithered up to Bijoy when he was in the *dolna* (hand-made swing), but thankfully had not bitten him. The situation became easier for Shobna once Bijoy started school and she returned to work part-time; however, as noted in Chapters 5 and 6, Shobna then faced the difficulty of getting Bijoy to school safely and on time each day. She also worried about him making his way back to her after school had finished, describing the dangers he faced walking by himself in the city.

I don't collect my son because he knows the way and I have to work. But I'm afraid because he has to go by the main road and there are a lot of cars. There's a lane and I tell him to always take that lane while coming back. I've showed him it and said to him, "You must come through this lane every day. Even if you see someone you know, don't take another route. And if you see something on the road, don't pick it up. Even if it's a toy. It might contain something." So he comes to where I'm working [...] then he changes his clothes and goes for tuition (Shobna, 12.12.2015).

The issue of who was going to take care of Bijoy also resurfaced on days when he was sick. 'I have to go to work,' Shobna explained, 'but I can't leave him as there's no

¹¹⁰ Usually women return to their natal homes to give birth, spending time there afterwards to recover; however, owing to the fact Shobna's parents had passed away, she gave birth to Bijoy in her in-laws' home.

one else to take care of him.’ Shobna would, as indicated in Chapter 6, sometimes bring Bijoy with her to work; the kind *boudi* she spoke about often would help to take care of him or else allow Shobna to finish work early so that she could look after him. Her other employers, however, thought that she was making excuses if she explained that Bijoy was not well and she was unable to go into work: ‘If he’s better after a few days, they’ll say, “He’s recovered so quickly!” [mocking tone]. I tell them he’s not completely better but that I can come into work. If he wasn’t a bit better, why would I go into work? My son comes first, not my work’ (12.12.2015).

As a single parent and mother of three, Anjali could empathise with Shobna’s situation and the lack of understanding she often faced from employers. On the same visit when we had talked about Anjali’s health, she explained how, just that morning, her daughter, Gita, had woken up with a sharp pain in her stomach, presenting Anjali with a dilemma. Anjali had not wanted to leave Gita but in the end felt she had no choice, giving the girl medicine and leaving her to rest on the bed. ‘I didn’t want to go, but what else could I do? I cook for one elderly *mashi-ma* and if I don’t go, she won’t be able to eat’ (22.04.2015). Anjali was understandably concerned about her losing job, and what her employers would say, especially as she had not informed them of her absence the day before; but, equally, she seemed to be concerned about the welfare of the elderly woman for whom she cooked, who, she indicated, would not have been able to eat – at least not on time – if it were not for her. Here, then, the decision to stay back from work was (further) complicated by the fact that Anjali’s work itself involved an element of caring, there perhaps being in this case not only feelings of obligation towards the older woman, but also ties of affection and a sense of care and concern.

Shushma’s situation was yet more challenging on account of the fact that her fourteen-year-old daughter, Minati, had suffered a serious head injury as a baby and had never been able to access the treatment she needed. ‘We took her to many doctors, hospitals. At PG Hospital, they told me that her brain had to be operated on. We needed Rs.50,000 but didn’t have the money [...] She can’t walk. She’s ‘stiff’ and just lies on the bed’ (Shushma, 13.06.2015). Shushma’s in-laws lived nearby but did not help very often and so Shushma worked in shifts with her husband to look after Minati; Shushma cared for the girl during the day, when her husband was out at work, and then herself went to work in the evening, once her husband returned. Shushma

explained that this arrangement worked relatively well, and that, by doing ‘night duty’, she could ensure that Minati was looked after whilst still earning good money (Rs.6,000 a month); however, she nevertheless struggled to say goodbye to Minati every evening. ‘I feel terrible leaving and staying out all night. I suffer a lot (*khub koshto hoy*). But what else can I do? I have to make money. I have to buy everything apart from water – and sometimes I even have to buy water because it’s not good here’ (13.06.2015). She felt particularly guilty in the summer months when the bedroom would become thick with heat, and on days when her husband was late and she was forced to leave Minati alone until he returned. Taking care of Minati in shifts also meant that Shushma and her husband saw very little of one another, and that they also spent little time together with Minati.

A major problem highlighted in these accounts is the lack of childcare options for women. In some cases, women can rely on family; indeed, support with childcare was one of the reasons Santi and her husband decided to move out of their own rented home and into Santi’s parents’ home. However, because commuters tend to live in small, nuclear family units and are often disconnected from their marital and natal kin – because of migration, family breakdown and so on – many have no such familial support (Parichiti, 2015: 50-51). Moreover, due to the degree of turnover in the villages where commuters live, commuters do not always know or trust their neighbours. Women relatives and neighbours are, furthermore, *themselves* likely to be going out to work, the communities where commuters and city-dwelling workers live being largely deserted by women during the day. As we helped Santi to carry her belongings to her parent’s house, she explained that, without familial support, she would not have been able to even consider taking up work as an *ayah*, which typically involves long day or night shifts. ‘In today’s world, nobody wants to look after another’s kids. If you don’t have your own family, nobody will help you’ (30.11.2015). I asked Santi and her mother, Malati, if it was common for women in their village to pay for others to look after their children, as women often do in Kolkata, but the pair quickly ruled this out as too expensive.

Lauren: Are there *ayahs* in the village?

Malati: Today, if you want someone to look after your kid, you have to pay Rs.1,500 a month.

Santi: If I go for child care work (*baccha-dhora kaa*) I would be paid this much. But I would only give my child to someone I trust.

Sohini: So much money?

Santi: Yes, many have to pay this. Nobody will look after your child for free. To take your child to school and bring them back, they charge Rs.500.

Sohini: And for the whole day, how much is it?

Santi: More than Rs.1,000 (30.11.2015).

Unsurprisingly, none of the women I knew could afford to pay private child care rates, and only two women – Madhumita and Chitra – had used government-run crèches in the past, when they had been living in Kolkata (see also Ray & Qayum, 2010: 130). In both cases, moreover, the use of crèches proved problematic as they did not offer adequate and affordable forms of care or were not located conveniently enough. Madhumita suggested that the provision of childcare offered by crèches was inadequate, though it was not clear from her account whether she was referring to the fact that crèches are not free for parents to use, are unaffordable when used for more than a few hours at a time, or simply do not offer the forms of all-day care that parents often require.

In Rabindra Sarobar, there's a crèche named Vidyasagar Academia where the kids of poor families go. I used to keep my youngest daughter there and go for work. She was one month old. I used to go for work and then, after two or three hours, I would collect her again. There is no place where you can keep your daughter from seven in the morning till five in the evening. They only keep them for three or four hours, but not more than that (Madhumita, 02.06.2015).

As noted in Chapter 4, Chitra found it difficult to get her children to and from the crèche each day, since it was located a considerable distance from the informal settlement where she and her family had lived at the time; indeed, this was one of the main reasons that she and her husband decided to move out of the city to Garia, where her children would be safer when she had to leave them alone to go to work.

Although Chitra and Madhumita's accounts highlight the inadequacy of state-subsidised childcare provision, they were at least able to access such forms of childcare by virtue of the fact that they had then lived within the city's limits; women residing outside the city, appear to have no such facilities to fall back on. Moreover, as noted already, commuters – like city-dwelling domestic workers – cannot afford the type of private childcare they themselves are often employed to provide, and they are generally unaware of any cheaper options. If women do not have familial or other support networks (which is often the case) and they cannot afford to remain out of

employment until their children are in school, they end up having to either take them to work or leave them at home unsupervised. Moving out of the city eventually enabled Chitra and her husband to own land and build a house in a village close to Sonarpur, but this decision was also connected to concerns about her children's safety. She still had to leave her children alone when living in Garia and later in Sonarpur, but she could at least let them play outside; in the city, she had had to lock her children up inside the small dilapidated shack they had shared, fearing what would happen if they ran about outside. As we have also seen, the problem of childcare is only partly alleviated when children go to school since women must then ensure that children reach school and tuition safely and on time each day. The problem of childcare also resurfaces on days when children are sick.

Better Things to Come

While commuters regret not being able to provide more care for their children, and they also grapple with the stigma that is attached to paid domestic work, they at the same time emphasise the material provision and support they provide for their families, particularly children, articulating this support as an extension of their mothering roles (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 166-167, 208-209). Kabita, as we saw in Chapter 7, stressed how she had paid 'for everything', including her sons' school fees and books, during the years she had spent doing *khawa-pora kaaj* in Kolkata; while Priya spoke of the sacrifices she had made – including juggling five jobs and rushing so much that she sometimes burnt her hands – to give her children what they needed. Like city-dwelling workers, and indeed domestic workers around the world, commuters strongly disavow a life of domestic and manual labour for their children, investing often tremendous amounts of time and money in their education, which, they believe, will be their ticket to better kinds of work and thus a better kind of life (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 194-195; see also Dill, 1980; Glenn, 1992). Education is viewed as the primary means of achieving upward social mobility, but it is also considered to be socially empowering and thus the key to a better quality of life. Parents believe that even a small amount of education will help their children to fare better in modern, adult life; and, as we shall see, commuters – like city-dwelling workers – insist upon the value of education for sons and daughters, even if this leads to marriage rather than educated employment (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 195).

By actively pursuing smaller families and working in the city, most commuters I knew were able to keep at least one child in school (although this was more difficult for women who lived alone), and many better-off women, as we have seen, also paid for private tuition (often to compensate for the poor quality of teaching at school) and extra-curricular activities, such as dance and art classes (see also Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 194-197). Chitra summarised what she saw as a significant change in attitudes and norms around raising children and children's education over her lifetime.

Earlier women didn't go out to work. Men would do that. But now we have to educate our children and go to work ourselves. Earlier women would stay at home, take care of the animals. Children didn't get a good education – boys and girls didn't go to school. Or if they did, they would only study up to Class 4 or 5 (aged 10-11). Now if we go and work, we can bring some money home and spend part of it on our children's education. Also, before children wouldn't ask for things. They would just wear whatever was given to them and go out. But nowadays, they want new clothes – new shoes, new bags. There's much more focus on spending money, on studies and other things. We think whatever has happened to us is in the past and we want our children to have everything. They should also be able to fend for themselves, feed themselves. They should have their own path. Earlier girls would just be married and would go to stay with their in-laws. Boys would run around and then work in the fields. But those days are over. Whether it's the village or the city, we want to educate our children. My son has a 'bachelors' and my daughter-in-law is also doing her 'bachelors' (Chitra, 12.07.2015).

Although Chitra's account must be read within the context of the research encounter and increasing social pressure on working-class parents to prioritise children's education,¹¹¹ a shift in attitudes and norms has undoubtedly taken place in recent years, with children being encouraged to study more and until a later age – regardless of their background. Working-class parents believe that education is not only the only viable escape from a life of domestic/manual labour, but also makes their children 'better people' (*bhalo lok*); if children succeed and secure good jobs, moreover, they may be able to provide their parents with security in old age.

As Chitra indicates, mothers are expected to take an active role in children's education and development. In Kolkata, as Henrike Donner (2006: 373) notes, middle-class mothers are a ubiquitous presence, and can be seen outside or close to

¹¹¹ Being from the 'West' and being associated with Parichiti – an NGO which is actively campaigning against early/child marriage – Chitra may have felt pressured to give the 'correct' response when asked about children and children's education.

schools (waiting for children and so on) at almost all times of the day. Living near to one of the busiest schools in south Kolkata, I would frequently have to push past such mothers on my way in and out of my apartment; and, in the nearby stationary shop, I often came across mothers – sometimes with children, sometimes without – who had come to enlist the help of the stationer in completing children’s homework. Working-class women are similarly invested in their children’s education, but, as we have seen, they do not have the time to wait for children outside school or to help them with their homework. The demands of their work mean that they must drop children off quickly before themselves rushing off to work. Domestic workers also cannot easily engage in the elaborate consumption practices Chitra describes. To be a ‘good’ mother, one must not only invest in children’s education but must do so *visibly*, paying for children’s school and tuition fees as well as an assortment of school-related paraphernalia – books, bags, shoes and so on – which serve as markers of social status for children and their families (see also Stivens, 1998: 63; Donner, 2006: 392); however, this ‘focus on spending’, as Chitra puts it, is difficult to reconcile with the low wages domestic workers are paid and the often extreme economic insecurity they endure as a result – an issue that is faced by parents in other parts of the world (see, for instance, Pugh, 2009).

Not Just Boys

It is heartening to note that parents’ commitment to children’s education appears to apply to sons and daughters alike, and that there are few examples of overt discrimination between sons and daughters, although, as commuters’ accounts of their own lives indicate, girls are often the first to be pulled out of school in times of crisis and, for reasons that remain unclear, few girls pass the school-leaving Madhyamik examination.¹¹² In many cases, girls appear to receive as much time and

¹¹² Girls are, perhaps, pulled out of school before the examination stage, for work or for marriage, but they might also leave school willingly. Sen and Sengupta note that children of domestic workers sometimes abandon education against their parents’ wishes, the decision to leave school, they suggest, being connected to children’s awareness of the tight employment situation (outlined in Chapter 4) and what they see as their poor chances of securing educated employment (2016: 195-196). Girls may also feel more obliged to help their mothers financially i.e. dropping out of school so that they can work and contribute to the household. In addition, girls, like boys, may struggle to cope with the workload and examinations or else may simply find school boring/uninteresting (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: 196).

investment from their parents as boys – at least while they are young. Certainly, where commuters have only daughters, these daughters are cherished and given as many of the extras that parents can afford, the increasing importance of girl children likely being linked to the decreasing size of the family. Santi, Madhumita, and Anjali, for instance, were all extremely supportive of their daughters' education and all three stated their wish for their daughters to 'study well' and continue in education for as long as possible, although in Anjali's case, this was much harder to ensure given her financial situation. Madhumita's daughters, as noted already, attended art and dance classes, as well as school and tuition, and during visits to their home, Madhumita explained that she tried to fit her work around her daughters schooling and lessons, even sometimes managing to attend school meetings and so on. It was important to Madhumita that her daughters had everything they needed and that they could pass for urban school-going girls; she took great pride in teaching her daughters 'the ways of the city', including how to wear salwar kameez, how to speak to city-people, and how to eat in 'good places'. Although Madhumita had not been sent away to do live-in work as a girl, as many other commuters had, she had nevertheless had to leave school when she reached Class 8 (aged 13-14), subsequently taking up tailoring work to help support her family and for a time afterwards working in a small shop. Unsurprisingly, then, she craved for her daughters the life she herself had been denied.

I believe it is the age for girls to study rather than work. From my side, my mother wanted me to study but the environment in which we stayed, it was not possible. Now I want my daughters to study. I will never want them to work like me. I think always whether I will be able to make them study, what will they study afterwards, what if they leave studies? This is something that always worries me. I want to make them live a dream that I had but couldn't. She [elder daughter] is very ill. She stays sick. For three months, she's had a fever. The doctor said she has 'sodium potassium deficiency', 'protein deficiency'. She needs to have 'protein'. Because of her health, I couldn't give her for 'hockey'. I loved 'hockey'. During my school days, I used to always get prizes for it. I loved sports. So I always wished if I had a son or a daughter, I will admit them in some sports. But since she is so weak, I don't even try it for her. I have given my younger daughter in gymnastics but she doesn't have any interest. Rather she is interested in dance. So now I feel if I try to impose my dreams and will on them which they fail to take up, I cannot do that. Her father was like, "What will one do with painting?" but she draws so well, so I insisted that she should get into drawing and painting. I told her I will pay for all the fees, whatever is needed. She said she wants to get into an art college

and wants to study arts... My elder daughter helps me with house work, then goes to tuition and comes back at 9pm (02.06.2015).

Madhumita clearly had great hopes and expectations for her daughters, even though she was also aware of the dangers of imposing her own dreams onto her daughters and later in our conversation spoke of her wish for them to follow their own rather than her wishes. Her account also reveals a number of tensions – between herself and her daughters and between herself and her husband – about what shape those dreams and wishes should take. Her elder daughter's ill-health which was, as she indicates, connected to poor diet and a lack of protein, arguably made it difficult for her to live up to her mother's expectations; and her husband had also questioned her plan for their daughter to pursue further studies in art. In addition, Madhumita worried about her daughters leaving school early (possibly for the reasons outlined earlier). The eldest daughter's ill-health was also arguably not helped by the family's hectic daily routine; Madhumita's daughters were, as noted in Chapter 7, incredibly busy with schooling and extra-curricular activities; and, as Madhumita notes here, her eldest daughter was also expected to help around the house. Madhumita was indeed often too busy to meet or else not home when we visited her village, and when I managed to catch her at home, she and her daughters – particularly the elder one – typically looked exhausted.

Santi too was incredibly supportive of her daughter's education, and visits to Santi's home would, as noted in Chapter 7, frequently take place against a backdrop of hurried preparations for Bina's tuition. Bina was Santi's only child and very clearly her pride and joy. The day we visited Santi and watched her help Bina step into a bright red puffy dress, Santi explained how she had struggled to find a good school where Bina could learn both Bengali and English. Santi was especially proud of the fact that her daughter was learning English, just like many middle-class mothers (see also Donner, 2006: 374), and on several occasions asked Bina to recite the alphabet for us, or whatever else it was that she happened to be learning in school. Santi hoped that by encouraging her daughter to do well at school and paying for her tuition, Bina would be able to get 'a good job' (*chakri*), thereby escaping a life of domestic service. Santi was one of three generations of women doing domestic work; her grandmother, Supriya, and her mother, Malati, had both done domestic work and indeed Malati was still working in Kolkata at the time of my fieldwork, although she planned to work less

so that she could help look after Bina when Santi started working as an *ayah*. Santi had a good relationship with her mother and grandmother, but was nevertheless bitter about the fact that, at the age of eight, she had been made to do *khawa-pora kaaj* in Kolkata. She spoke about the poor conditions and pay she had had to endure and vehemently rejected this sort of life for Bina.

One day my parents said, “We’re going to Kolkata.” I thought I’d be able to study. I never realised I’d be made to work instead. When I heard, I cried a lot and said, “I won’t go”. But my father said, “I can’t even run the family. How can I pay for your education?” Then I was forced to go to work. I was paid Rs.40, working all day until midnight. At that point in time, that’s all we were given. Those were the wages (Santi, 25.11.2015).

As noted in Chapter 4, such stories are unfortunately common in West Bengal, where, despite legislation prohibiting child labour, a significant number of young girls continue to work as live-in domestic servants (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2008). In Santi’s case, her parents had been unable to earn enough money in the Sundarbans; however, there are other reasons why girl children are sent away for *khawa-pora kaaj*. The decision is often precipitated by a family crisis (the injury, illness or death of a father, for example), but sometimes it is also taken for the daughter’s ‘protection’.

Lauren: Did you start working before or after marriage?

Priya: I started working before marriage. I used to do *khawa-pora kaaj*.

Sohini: So you used to stay there?

Priya: Yes. My father was very ill and my mother and father only had me. He had ‘TB’. It was more than 20 years ago now. ‘TB’ was very serious and he was very ill. He had to be kept separated in Jadavpur ‘TB’ Hospital for two years. We had a rented house then. We didn’t have our own land. We suffered a lot (*koshto koro thaktam*). Since I was the only daughter and I was young and the boys in the area had started to bother me – they used to pass comments and try to touch me – my mother sent me away for *khawa-pora kaaj*. For my safety.

Lauren: How old were you when you started doing *khawa-pora kaaj*?

Priya: Class 5 – so 10 or 11 years old.

Lauren: What was it like doing *khawa-pora kaaj*?

Priya: It was difficult. I was supposed to look after a child [...] When I used to do *khawa-pora kaaj*, they gave me food but it was scraps from their plates. I suffered a lot. By the end, I said to my mother, “Get me married so I can leave.” But even after getting married, it didn’t get much better [whispering]. There was no peace with my in-laws. [...] Since I stay over here, separately, I’m free. I work hard, eat, and live happily. I’m able to educate my children and manage (18.01.2016).

Although in Priya's case, leaving live-in work to get married brought her different kinds of problems – with her in-laws – and she and her husband later decided to move out of her in-laws' home and into their own rented home, she nevertheless continued to believe that marriage offers girls/women protection, reflecting both dominant ideas about domestic femininity and concerns about girls'/women's sexuality and 'honour'. This became clear when talking to her about her plans for her daughters.

Lauren: You seem to have a good relationship with your daughters, is that right?

Priya: I try to guide them. I don't allow them to go out in the evening. If she [youngest daughter who still lives at home] goes out for tuition, she comes straight back afterwards and if she wants to go to the *mela* (festival), we go with her. We don't send her alone or with other people. If someone comes and says, "We'll take her with us," I say, "No. I'll take her myself." We try to keep her as safe as we can but if anything happens to her it must be in my destiny... love is not wrong (*bhalobashata kono papay jinishta na*). I have told my daughter, "If you ever fall in love, you should tell me. I will help you. If you tell others, they won't help you. They will only talk about you and spread it around. We'll get a bad name." With my eldest daughter, my son-in-law said at first that he wouldn't marry her [her eldest daughter], but later started to like her. I kept it quiet for one year – nobody else knew. Then I decided to get her married.

Lauren: She still lives very close by doesn't she?

Priya: Yes, very close. It's good... Suppose I work in five houses and they give me something good. If my daughter was in some faraway place, I wouldn't be able to share it with her. Since she stays here, I can just give her a call and she'll come. Whatever I get, I share it with her. I don't know what is in store for my youngest daughter. I hope that my son will study a lot – if I have to, I'll sell everything so he can study. I can't say whether he'll look after me or not. I only want him to be happy. I don't want him to struggle like we do. For example, his father has to deal with a lot of people for his work. It's the same in 'offices' too, but there's more respect in offices. For us, we work hard and sometimes earn their respect but we have to hear a lot from them [employers]. At times, we want to leave but we can't. We need the money. We have to bear it and take it. We have to drink it down. This is the way it goes (*onek kichu shojo hojon kore nite hoy hojon kore niye gile nite hoy...eron korei chole*).

Lauren: What do you wish for your youngest daughter?

Priya: I've not really thought about it... I want her to pass the 'higher secondary examination' well and if after that she wants to learn something, like 'computer' for six months, like my eldest daughter did, or stitching, but there's less need for that now because a lot of people have machines. If she wants to work in a small company or if she gets married in a well-off family so she won't have to work. Because of this, she'll only study until Class 12 (17-18). After that, I won't send her to college. I can't afford it and also in this area I don't want to keep her like a pet.

Sohini: Why this area? Is there a problem here?

Priya: Yes, we live in a poor place. If she goes to college alone, suppose it's night college, she may come home late. The people around here would say [imitates in whinging voice], "She didn't go to college. She's been roaming around with someone. I've seen her." But in reality, they've not seen anything. So before they can raise a finger at us, once she's 18, I'll get her married. After she passes her 'secondary', she might find someone herself or I'll do it. I'll arrange the marriage, but only after four years. Since I have to finish this house and have other expenses and debts to pay. After all of that, I'll save and get her married. She's only 15 so I have some time (18.01.2016).

Priya's account, in part, points to discrimination between sons and daughters; she states that she is willing to make considerable sacrifices for her son to continue studying and that she has hardly thought about plans for her daughter, later ruling out college and explaining that she will rather encourage her to learn a skill – like her older sister did – or else to get married and, ideally, not have to work at all. Priya seemed to have a good relationship with daughters – her eldest daughter, who was married and lived nearby, would often come to visit when we visited Priya at home and, as Priya explains, she called her often and shared gifts from employers with her. However, she was considerably more invested in her son's education than that of her youngest daughter. This was possibly because, as she indicated earlier in our conversation, she thought of her son as bright while her daughter frequently made mistakes at school, but also perhaps because of the persistent expectation that sons, rather than daughters, will look after parents in old age. With daughters, moreover, there is the additional consideration of needing to protect the girl's 'honour' (*izzat*), as well as that of the family which is tied up with girl's 'honour'. Thus, while Priya spoke of wanting to delay marriage for her youngest daughter until she was eighteen – something which, again, reflects the changing norms around children and childhood but which might also reflect beliefs about what was an acceptable account to give within the research encounter – she also wanted to make sure that it happened no later than this, in case people started to talk.

Delaying a daughter's marriage, as Priya indicates, also brings concerns about girls' safety since unmarried, 'unprotected' girls/women are typically perceived as sexually transgressive and thus more likely to be attacked and assaulted. Chitra in fact explained that this was why she had decided to get her daughter married early: 'I had my daughter married when she was in Class 6 (aged 11-12) because I was worried

about her safety. I would have to leave her alone when I went to work and worried about what would happen to her' (12.07.2015). Unmarried teenage girls are also considered to be more likely to engage in illicit, pre-marital relationships, which, again, is detrimental to their own and their family's 'honour'. Priya's eldest daughter had, it seems, pursued an illicit relationship with a boy in her village when she was seventeen, and Priya had had to work hard to hurry her marriage to this boy while keeping their pre-marital relationship a secret – possibly even from her husband – thereby preserving the girl's and her family honour. Priya had, as she indicates, been rather practical about all of this – which perhaps signals a changing attitude to love marriage – but she also clearly wished to avoid such trouble a second time, with her youngest daughter. Indeed, if Priya had not handled the situation with her eldest daughter so well her daughter might have eloped with the boy, or else their relationship might have become public knowledge, *forcing* the pair to run off and leaving the rest of the family to face the consequences. This, then, likely factored into Priya's thinking when articulating her plans for her daughter's future. Additionally, she may have been concerned about the tight employment situation, viewing marriage, rather than continued education, as the more sensible option for her daughter.

There were similar contradictions in Anjali's account, which, like Priya's pointed to a tension between wanting daughters to study and wanting daughters to be 'protected' within marriage. When asked what she wanted for her daughter, Anjali, like other mothers, talked passionately about Gita's education and her hope for Gita to continue studying for as long as possible. 'I want good things for my daughter. I hope that she will study well, she is good at studying. She says to me, "wake me up in the morning when you wake up. I want to get up and study before school"' (Anjali, 22.04.2015). However, as noted earlier, she was also planning to get Gita married and, when I knew her, was in the process of getting together the money she thought she would need for the wedding and dowry. Given Anjali's severe ill-health, she likely felt pressure to try and provide her daughter with some form of security and protection while she still could, and considered marriage the best option. Indeed, even though, as we have seen, there is a high incidence of marital breakdown – Anjali herself was a single mother, having earlier fled her husband on account of his drinking and abuse – the idea that marriage is a form a protection persists. As discussed in earlier chapters, Anjali was undergoing treatment for breast cancer at the time of my

fieldwork and found the daily grind of commuting and working increasingly difficult. She was incredibly worried about being able to carry on and about who would look after her daughter if the worst came to pass and thus likely made a calculation about what was the more realistic and achievable outcome for her daughter – educated employment or marriage – in the end settling on marriage which she hoped would provide her daughter with at least some security for the future. Because Anjali had herself not studied (or at least not very much), it was also arguably difficult for her to guide her daughter in her studies (see also Dill, 1980: 110).

Mithu had similarly decided to get her daughter married young, at the age of thirteen, describing the offer she received from the suitor's mother – her daughter's mother-in-law – as a blessing (*bor*). Mithu explained that she and her husband, Biswanath, had been pleased to receive the offer, in part because the family in question were 'good' and they believed that their daughter would be well looked after. Mithu spoke particularly fondly of her daughter's mother-in-law, explaining how smoothly the wedding arrangements had taken place between herself and this woman: 'it was like playing with dolls' (23.07.2015).¹¹³ From spending time with Mithu and her husband, however, it seemed that the happy occasion was also tinged with regret, and, furthermore, that their agreement was largely the result of financial compulsion. Following the pair around their bedroom as they took turns to point out the girl's various portraits, Mithu explained that she and her husband missed their daughter – also their only child – dearly. As outlined in earlier chapters, Mithu and Biswanath had experienced great financial difficulty after Biswanath had lost his job in a factory, and even though Mithu had been able to support the family through working as an *ayah* in Kolkata (with Biswanath's later earnings as a *rickshaw-wallah* adding a bit of extra money to the household income), the pair worried about how they would cope in years to come – particularly after Mithu had suffered the accident outlined in Chapter 5. Quite understandably, then, they viewed the timely offer from a 'good' family as simply too good to refuse.

Although marriage remains both ubiquitous and important, with the pattern of early marriage described here reflecting both dominant ideas about domestic

¹¹³ It is also possible that Mithu and her husband were not asked to pay a dowry, or that the dowry they paid was manageable, and that this was among the reasons they accepted the offer.

femininity/patriarchal protection and a degree of pragmatism on the part of parents, this does not detract from the increasing emphasis that poor and working-class parents place on children's education – nor does it suggest that those who marry their daughters at a young age consider their earlier investments in education a waste. Rather, commuters' accounts indicate that, for various reasons, daughters' marriages sometimes become the more pressing priority (particularly for those in more precarious circumstances); and, furthermore, that even while women may envisage marriage rather than employment for their daughters, there remains a powerful belief in the value of education. As Sen and Sengupta summarise in relation to city-dwelling workers but which also applies in the case of commuters: 'aspirations from education are not always about better jobs, but about a better quality of life. It is this latter perception that drives the education of daughters, even if mothers envisage happy domesticity rather than employment for them' (2016: 195). For Anjali, who perhaps understood better than most that marriage is no guarantee of security and happiness, supporting her daughter's education was not necessarily about helping her to secure educated employment, but about enabling her to cope with the trials and tribulations of life. 'I left that place for my daughters, so that I could raise them properly [...] I want good things for her' (Anjali, 22.04.2015).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored commuters' views about children and their hopes for a better future *for their children*. Commuters, as we have seen, frequently emphasise their roles as mothers, insisting that their children 'come first' and seeking jobs that give them the greatest degree of flexibility to look after children; however, in practice, as this chapter has illustrated, they often struggle to combine paid employment with caring responsibilities. Commuters cannot afford to pay private childcare rates and they cannot in many cases rely on family either. The burden of childcare is somewhat alleviated once children are in school, but the problem resurfaces when children are sick. In attempting to cope with this dilemma and account for the painful gap between expectation and lived experience, commuters often emphasise the material support they provide for their families, particularly children's schooling and tuition, which reflects a powerful belief in the value of education – both as a vehicle for achieving intergenerational upward social mobility and as socially empowering. Many

commuters themselves began working as children and so it is important to them that their children's lives turn out differently. They wish for them to 'study well' and get 'good jobs', and they also hope that, in doing so, they may be able to provide *them* with security in old age.

While there is a great deal of hope and optimism among commuters in relation to children and children's futures, there is at the same time much pragmatism – a theme that runs throughout this thesis. Due to the poor quality of education and the tight employment situation, commuters' dreams of educated employment for their children are only rarely realised. Children – especially girls – sometimes leave school of their own accord, and against their parents' wishes; while, in other cases, they are *taken out* of school, for work or marriage. There is a persisting notion that marriage offers girls/women 'patriarchal protection', which in turn reflects ideas about women's 'honour' and respectability; but the decision to marry daughters early is also, as we have seen, often connected to the wider circumstances and precarity of commuters' lives. Indeed, for many commuters, it is marriage, rather than continued education, that becomes the most pressing priority in relation to their daughters when thinking about the future. In these cases, then, commuters settle for *some* education for their children, which is still often more than they themselves had and which they believe will help to prepare their children for the ups and downs of life and in turn become better people (*bhalo lok*).

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

Ki Korbo? Pragmatism in the Face of Precarity

Throughout this thesis, I have foregrounded the everyday lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers in Kolkata, offering a rich and detailed account of an under-researched yet significant group. Commuters, as we have seen, are among the growing ranks of women ‘live-out’ or ‘visiting’ domestic workers in Kolkata, most of whom work part-time in one or more (usually several) households a day; however, unlike city-dwelling domestic workers, commuters – who live in villages and peri-urban areas outside the city and who must travel often considerable distances to get to work – are yet to receive proper academic attention. At the same time, the literature on commuting, which is mostly focused on Northern contexts, often paints a rather rosy picture of commuting – as a complex mobility strategy or a space for thinking, relaxing, and socialising – which does not generally fit with the situation in India. There is, moreover, a distinct lack of *ethnographic* research on commuting – something which is, again, likely tied to the fact that most commuting studies are about Western Europe and North America, where, to a large extent, and in contrast to India, the experience of the commute begins and ends with the commute. Providing further rationale for this study, as we have seen, is the way in which commuting domestic workers are often represented and talked about – both by middle-class employers, who often look upon them as a dirty, dangerous rabble, and city-dwelling domestic workers who blame them for creating competition and pushing down wages. In short, commuters have been both marginalised and maligned, something which is reflected, as we saw in Chapter 3, in the way that some workers are unable to speak about their experiences and lives (offering a constant refrain, *Ki bolbo?*), while others do so readily and often with a sense of bitterness and resentment (for employers, husbands, sons). All of this, then, has underscored the need for rich and nuanced research on domestic work and commuting in Kolkata and West Bengal.

This thesis has, then, aimed to fill an important gap with respect to literature on domestic work in India, and to offer a corrective to the wider literature on commuting as well as more popular ideas about commuting domestic workers. Building upon existing scholarship, and utilising novel methodological approaches and tools (multi-

sited and ‘moving’ ethnography), it has explored the *experience* of commuting for domestic workers in Kolkata – or, in other words, *what it is like* to undertake these journeys, and *what it is like* to combine them with a heavy burden of paid and unpaid domestic work. The commute is, as we have seen in Chapter 5, expensive, time-consuming, arduous, and sometimes dangerous for domestic workers. In the summer and rainy months, many of the existing issues to do with poor infrastructure and overcrowding are exacerbated; but year-round, commuters face problems – in relation to toilet access, safety, overcrowding. Moreover, rather than offering workers the ‘gift’ of time, commuting in many cases contributes to severe time pressure for workers, the result being that workers must rush constantly *and* still are often late – for employers’ and their own homes. Additionally, commuting takes a serious toll on workers’ health and bodies, becoming increasingly difficult with age; as we have seen, the accounts of older women, and those with health issues are particularly distressing. While then commuting affords workers the chance to earn money and, in some cases, own land and property, the experience is nevertheless articulated as one of pain and suffering (*koshto*) and those who can give it up after a certain point do so. Furthermore, while the commute sometimes offers possibilities and opportunities – in terms of socialising, relaxing, and, importantly, forming networks and solidarities with other commuters and with NGOs – these do not outweigh or equal the challenges described above; rather they enable workers to better endure the commute and possibly help them bargain for better conditions of work.

The thesis has also drawn attention to the *embedded* and *cumulative* nature of commuting, illustrating how commuting affects other areas of domestic workers’ lives and making a case for commuting as a category of analysis or a lens through which to better understand the everyday lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers. As we have seen, the experience of commuting does not, for domestic workers, begin or end with the commute; rather the commute affects all areas of workers’ lives, requiring careful and constant negotiation. In Chapter 6, we have seen how commuters are the most autonomous as well as the most insecure of all the various kinds of domestic worker, facing intense competition in the neighbourhoods where they work and in many cases living in constant fear of dismissal. In Chapter 7, we saw how commuters balance paid work and commuting with a heavy burden of *unpaid* domestic labour, and how commuters negotiate dominant ideas about

women's 'honour' and 'respectability', carefully managing the stigma around women's work and mobility and guarding against suspicion and surveillance from husbands, sons, and neighbours. At work and at home, moreover, the issue of constant rushing and constant 'lateness' – something which is, as noted above, connected to the nature of commuters' work (the fact they juggle multiple jobs and commute) but also to train delays and severe overcrowding on trains, particularly during the rainy season – compounds these issues, causing problems for workers both with employers, and family and neighbours. While 'being late' to work can mean that workers are scolded or dismissed by employers (the ease with which workers are often dismissed also being connected to the high level of turnover and an increasingly transactional relationship between workers and employers), being late home can lead to arguments with husbands, sons, and neighbours, and in turn violence and abuse.

Time has, in other ways too, been a key theme running throughout this thesis. As we saw in Chapter 4, those who typically explain their lives and work in terms of children and children's futures, and who are typically younger and more financially-stable, often pour all their hope into the future and a *better* future for their children, this hope manifesting in the often-tremendous investment that these commuters make (in terms of time, energy, and money) in children's education. There is a powerful belief in the value of education and parents believe that education will be their children's ticket to better kinds of work and a thus a better kind of life. Others, however, who typically explain their work and lives in terms of patriarchal failure, misfortune and suffering (*koshto*) and who are typically older, in a more precarious financial position, or suffering with ill-health, cannot look beyond the day-to-day and, if anything, appear to regard the future with a deep sense of foreboding. These commuters, as we saw clearly with Anjali, are caught up in the daily work of survival, of getting through; and for them the experience of commuting and the imperative of having to *keep commuting* – day-in, day-out and often against the odds – is more a story of structural violence, endurance, and severe hardship rather than one of hope and aspiration. Even with the more positive accounts, there is still much evidence of precarity and insecurity, which in turn underscores the need for effective policy solutions. One of the main issues facing commuters, as we have seen, is that of childcare. Because commuters tend to live in small, nuclear family units and thus cannot in many cases rely on family, and because of the degree of turnover in commuters' villages and

communities and the fact that women relatives and neighbours are *themselves* likely to be going out to work, childcare is a huge issue. More crèches, both in the city and in the communities where commuters live, would, as my analysis shows, make a huge difference to commuters' lives, enabling them to better manage paid work with their own caring responsibilities. Additionally, improvements to train and station infrastructure are needed: the problems commuters face in getting to and from the city are, as we have seen, often exacerbated by the poor conditions they must endure in these spaces. Overcrowding is a particularly key concern, as is access to toilets – an issue, which, as we have seen, is compounded in the case of domestic workers since they often cannot access toilets in employers' homes either. More generally, the analysis has illustrated the urgent need for a social security net to protect against illness, accidents, unemployment, and old age – or, in other words, for the same rights and protections that are afforded to other types of (formal sector) workers in India.

While the general picture that emerges from commuters' accounts is one of intense insecurity and precarity, there is also much pragmatism. Commuters are undeniably resourceful, savvy actors – indeed they must be given the wider circumstances of their lives – and their accounts contain numerous examples of everyday bargains which they make in the face of uncertainty and precarity. The language of 'adjustment' and the question *ki korbo?* (what will I do? What else can I do?) which is, as we have seen, a constant refrain in commuters' accounts, speaks to both a sense of hopelessness and despair but also a sense of pragmatism, of making do and getting on. At work, as we saw in Chapter 6, commuters seek to construct close, trusting, reciprocal relationships with employers, in part because these relationships can bring important non-wage benefits, but also because they confer a level of protection, stability, flexibility, and dignity to workers, which is important given the continuing lack of formal rights and protections, persisting class/caste connotations, and the broader context of increasing competition and insecurity outlined above. Because of the high degree of dismissal and turnover, opportunities for forming close, familial-like relationships with employers are increasingly hard to come by, this turnover and general atmosphere of insecurity making it both harder and more important than ever for workers to establish such relationships. The result, then, is that while workers sometimes leave jobs for new ones, many others stay and 'adjust' to jobs and employers they are dissatisfied with, the trade-off here being between relationships

which offer a degree of stability and flexibility with those that promise better wages but which may in turn be less secure and flexible.

There is also 'adjustment' within marriage, as we saw in Chapter 7. The stigma around women's work and mobility, which is in turn connected to dominant ideas about women's 'honour' and the stigma around women's sexuality, means that women must continually perform respectability, earning and keeping their husbands' trust and working to assuage 'doubts' before they arise. In cases of domestic violence, moreover, commuters have little option but to stay with their husbands and families and so find ways to either resist and challenge or bear and mitigate this violence, seeking support in networks which are often formed through commuting and maintained using mobile phones. Additionally, in Chapter 8, we also saw how commuters often adopt a pragmatic approach to children and parenting. In many cases, as noted above, commuters commute *for their children* – seeking to provide them with a better future or to simply to feed and take care of their basic needs. Moreover, while they often invest significantly in children's education, paying for their schooling and tuition and hoping that this investment will pay off in terms of better jobs for their children (and, arguably, security for *them* in their old age), they also often settle for *some* education for their children, particularly daughters, in many cases prioritising children's marriages over their continued education. In these cases, however, prior investment in education is not considered a waste; education is considered socially empowering and thus workers believe that even a small amount of education will help their children to lead better lives and become good people (*bhalo lok*).

The decision to commute itself is arguably a way of managing precarity, even though, as we have seen, commuting also brings *new forms* of precarity. As discussed in Chapter 4, the main reason workers commute is because of a lack of employment opportunities in the communities where they live, or in those they have migrated from. Living in urban informal settlements, moreover, workers have little chance of being able to buy land and property, which they see as crucial to providing their families with security; and the conditions in these urban informal settlements are often extremely poor which means that in order to give their children and families a better quality of life workers must move out of the city or else move to one of the peripheral commuter villages and peri-urban areas where there is space for children to play and where they

have a better chance of being able to own land and property. This decision, however, means that workers then become locked into commuting – an experience, which, as we have seen, brings various costs and consequences. In seeking to manage this new form of precarity, however, workers are forming important networks and solidarities – on and through the commute – which may in future provide them with the collective strength they need to bargain for better conditions of work in the city. More generally, as noted in Chapter 4, there has been increasing recognition for Kolkata’s domestic workers in recent years, largely because of the efforts of Parichiti and other organisations, the registration of a new domestic workers’ union in June 2018 and the increasing openness to the question of a minimum wage, which, although not uncomplicated, signals a sea change in attitudes towards these issues and affords workers and their allies a source of hope going forward.

As with all research, this thesis contains several knowledge gaps which in turn reflect the study’s limitations. There is a clear lack of men’s voices, although, as noted, this in part reflects the changing demographic of domestic workers in Kolkata and India (most workers now being women) and the fact that *commuting* domestic workers in Kolkata are overwhelmingly women. Future research could, then, explore in greater detail the experiences of commuting men and commuting fathers, a topic I have addressed only superficially. There is similarly a need for more research on the experiences of Muslim workers and older domestic workers – both commuting and city-dwelling – who, as illustrated here, face specific difficulties in finding and getting to work. In addition, the role of agencies is discussed in Chapter 4, in relation to how workers find work, but not in any detail. There is some scholarship on agencies in China (Croll, 1986) and in Australia (Meagher, 1997), and on broader processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation within these contexts, but not much has yet been conducted in India.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, digital technology may prove to be an important area of research in coming years. The rise of app-based services and websites like *bookmybai.com* promise increased flexibility for workers and employers, as well as increased security for employers; however, as with the global ‘gig economy’, these services and websites raise questions about workers’ rights and, in India, they have also been critiqued for facilitating discrimination against Muslims and

¹¹⁴ Agencies are discussed by Sen & Sengupta (2016: 250-254) and Grover (2018), but there is no in-depth research on this topic.

other minorities (Jain, 2015; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). Additionally, I have discussed in some detail the problems commuters face with respect to childcare, but I have only briefly mentioned other forms of care that commuters provide – including care for elderly parents. As in many other parts of the world, in India an ageing society means that women are increasingly having to care on two fronts – for children and parents – an issue which is clearly exacerbated in the case of poor, working-class women and which again highlights the need for social security and state provision (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). These limitations and gaps aside, the thesis has provided a rich and detailed account of domestic work and commuting in West Bengal, detailing the *experience* of commuting, which has been missing from both the literature on domestic work and the literature on commuting, but also drawing attention to the *embedded* and *cumulative* nature of commuting, illustrating how commuting affects other areas of domestic workers' lives and making a case for commuting as a category of analysis or a lens through which to better understand the lives and experiences of commuting domestic workers. In doing so, it has highlighted the precarious existence of commuting domestic workers as well as the pragmatism with which they manage this precarity day-to-day and over time, something which is encapsulated in no better way than in commuters' language of 'adjustment' and the oft-repeated question, *ki korbo?*

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